



ISSUE BRIEF

Why the Congo Matters

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The Democratic Republic of the Congo (the DRC or the Congo) possesses a population of close to 80 million people and unparalleled natural resources. It is therefore a country of tremendous potential, but only that. One of the most violent places on earth, its people suffer from the brutality of armed groups and political instability. With the growth of the formal mining sector, there is a new gleam of hope that the Congo's potential could be fulfilled. The realization of this promise will depend on responsible governance, but President Joseph Kabila's steadfast refusal to move forward with elections that are constitutionally required to take place this year threatens to extinguish the possibility that the Congo will overcome its own past and move forward to provide a safe and secure future for its people.¹ Unless the United States, the European Union, and other world leaders take an active role, not only the Congo but also the broader African Great Lakes region will succumb to a new wave of violence. The ensuing instability will create chaos but more frighteningly opportunity for those terrorist groups that thrive off of chaos.

The Congo's President has been in power for fifteen years and is constitutionally ineligible to contest the next presidential elections, which are due in November 2016. Kabila claims that he intends to respect the country's term limits, but has undertaken a number of administrative actions that clearly indicate that he intends to postpone elections by up to four years. (The regime asserts that it will not be possible to hold a free and fair poll without comprehensively updating the current voter lists—a daunting task in a massive country that is still poorly penetrated by telecommunications and roads.) The postponement is controversial, regarded by many as an illegal maneuver to extend his grip on Africa's

The Atlantic Council's **Africa Center** was established in September 2009 with the mission to promote dynamic geopolitical partnerships with African states and to redirect US and European policy priorities towards strengthening security and promoting economic growth and prosperity on the continent.

¹ In addition to a constitutional limit of two consecutive terms for the presidency, Article 220 of the DRC's constitution clearly states that the matter of term limits is not subject to any amendment. Thus not only is Kabila ineligible for a third term, but he is also barred by the constitution from seeking any change to the term-limits provision.

most mineral-rich nation; it threatens to plunge the Congo into yet another round of bloodletting.

This problem does not end at the Congo's borders. Across the African continent, Presidents are tinkering with constitutional and other provisions to prolong their tenures. Among them are the leaders of Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda—the states that trespassed into the Congo in 1996 and ignited a terrible, almost decade-long conflict, which engulfed a third of the African continent and is thought to have killed anywhere from three to five million people.² Instability within each of these states is spreading, albeit to varying degrees, as a number of African presidents seek to subvert their term limits and stifle dissent. At the same time, sub-regional quarrels—between Uganda and Sudan, and between Rwanda and Burundi—are once again escalating along the Congo's borders, creating a potent tinderbox that the United States and its allies cannot afford to ignore. The humanitarian cost of another Great Lakes war would likely be intolerable, even to an American and European public already overwhelmed by foreign wars and crises. Moreover, even a localized crisis within the Congo would threaten the interlocking set of US and European objectives in the region.

The Congo already ranks as one of the world's fastest-growing economies, achieving 9 percent gross domestic product growth in 2014 (albeit from a very low starting point because of the conflict).³ The country's vast mineral wealth and rich agricultural potential unquestionably offer the resources necessary for sustained growth. A stable, prosperous, and

diplomatically engaged DRC offers distinct geopolitical advantages to the United States and its allies: It is the largest country in sub-Saharan Africa, and its central location provides a natural juncture for everything from enhancing regional security to facilitating the trade of valuable minerals. But the economy's rapid growth has left the vast majority of its population behind. What the Congo lacks is a responsible government, capable of the judicious use and careful stewardship of those resources for the benefit of the population.

Kabila's administration has failed to ensure either stability or widespread prosperity in the Congo, and as a result, ordinary Congolese citizens have suffered greatly under his tenure. Massive human rights abuses have persisted throughout the country for more than a decade—especially in the country's east—prompting the United Nations to describe the Congo as “the worst place on earth to be a woman.”⁴ Yet these abuses need not be inevitable. Improved and reliable governing structures could enforce the rule of law, improve the economy, and promote better living standards for all of the Congo's citizens, especially the most vulnerable.

In the past year, Africa has witnessed a resurgence of leaders who have attempted to extend their rule and authority; a trend that exists in stark contrast to the highly competitive election and subsequent peaceful

transfer of power from Nigeria's former President Goodluck Jonathan to President Muhammadu Buhari in that country's March 2015 presidential race. The event was hailed as a milestone for African democracy. In a 2009 speech to the Ghanaian parliament, President Barack Obama declared: “Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions.”⁵ In 2016, the United States and its allies now confront a troubling—and potentially explosive—democracy deficit in one of the continent's largest and most strategic nations.

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2 See Gérard Prunier, *Africa's World War* (New York: Oxford University Press America, 2006). Casualty estimates from the multi-nation war that ravaged the Congo between 1996 and 2002 vary widely (uncertainty around the correct figure speaks volumes about the difficulty of finding comprehensive data and the extent of the country's disintegration), though the author estimates between three and four million people were killed in what is the deadliest conflict in the world since 1945. Other estimates suggest that as many as five million people died. See Jason K. Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

3 “Democratic Republic of Congo,” World Bank, 2014, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/drc>.

4 “The Worst Place on Earth to Be a Woman”: *Healing the Eastern Congo*, PBS, March 7, 2012, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/globalhealth-jan-june12-healafrika_03-07/.

5 The White House, “Remarks by the President to the Ghanaian Parliament,” July 11, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-ghanaian-parliament>.

A History of Violence

Shortly before his death in 1961, the Africanist Frantz Fanon commented that: “Africa has the shape of a gun and the Congo is its trigger; pulling that trigger could blow a whole continent apart.”⁶

The Congo is a massive country without geographical, ethnic, or linguistic unity. As is the case for so many African countries, the Congo’s borders were drawn haphazardly by the European colonists without reference to the historic, ethnic, or tribal identities of the land’s occupants. During the infamous “Scramble for Africa,” the Congo (then known as the Congo Free State) was looted and brutalized by Belgian King Leopold II, who used the territory as a private treasure chest and encouraged his mercenaries to subdue the population through horrific atrocities. When an international human rights campaign finally forced Leopold to surrender personal control of the Congo to his government in 1908, the Congolese welcomed Belgian colonization as a lesser form of evil.⁷

However, the Belgian government’s policy of “rational exploitation” was also exceptionally cruel. In 1960, the Congo experienced a hastily brokered decolonization, which was chaotic and ill-planned.⁸ The newly independent institutions of government failed almost immediately, provoking new rounds of Belgian and Soviet meddling. The vital, resource-rich province of Katanga tried to secede, prompting US-supported military involvement in the form of an expensive United Nations operation to forcibly reintegrate Katanga into the Congo. The mission eventually succeeded, but it created a cultural aversion to intervention by the “international community” that lingers on today.

In 1965, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu seized control of the Congo and ruled as an authoritarian dictator until 1997. His reign was cruel and infamously corrupt, but Mobutu Sese Seko (as he renamed himself) was a robust US ally during the Cold War, and Washington supported

him enthusiastically, reinforcing Congolese suspicions of the international community.⁹

It was the Rwandan genocide of 1994 that pushed the Congo toward full-fledged disaster: A massive wave of Rwandan refugees, some of them Hutu *genocidaires*, flooded into the Congo. The victorious Tutsi rebels chased after them and used the pursuit of the *genocidaires* as an excuse to remain in the country and plunder its resources. By 1996, Uganda and Burundi had followed Rwanda into the Congo. Sudan (both rebel and government factions), Libya, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, the Central African Republic, Angola, Zimbabwe, and South Africa then took sides in the fighting, and the looting spree became a war-by-proxy among fourteen African nations that dragged on for almost a decade. Today it is known as “Africa’s World War” and stands as the most murderous and destructive conflict since World War II.¹⁰

The Never-Ending War

The war eventually ground to a halt in 2002, without a conclusive victory by any side, dissipating in a combination of war-weariness, military stalemate, and political negotiation.

The peace process was rendered more complicated by the fact that the Congo’s President, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, who had seized power after Mobutu’s fall in 1997, was murdered in January 2001 as negotiations to end the war were ongoing. The Congo lacked any effective institutional framework for a presidential succession, and Laurent-Désiré’s son, Joseph Kabila, assumed the presidency. The international community, desperate to end the catastrophic war, was focused on the peace process and did not pause to consider Joseph Kabila’s fitness for office—merely his willingness to move forward with the peace negotiations. In that limited task, Kabila *fits* succeeded, and an end to the war was ultimately declared. However, with the single-minded focus on achieving a cessation of hostilities, neither the international community nor the new Kabila government gave due consideration to issues of sound governance, legitimacy, and institutional capacity-building. By the

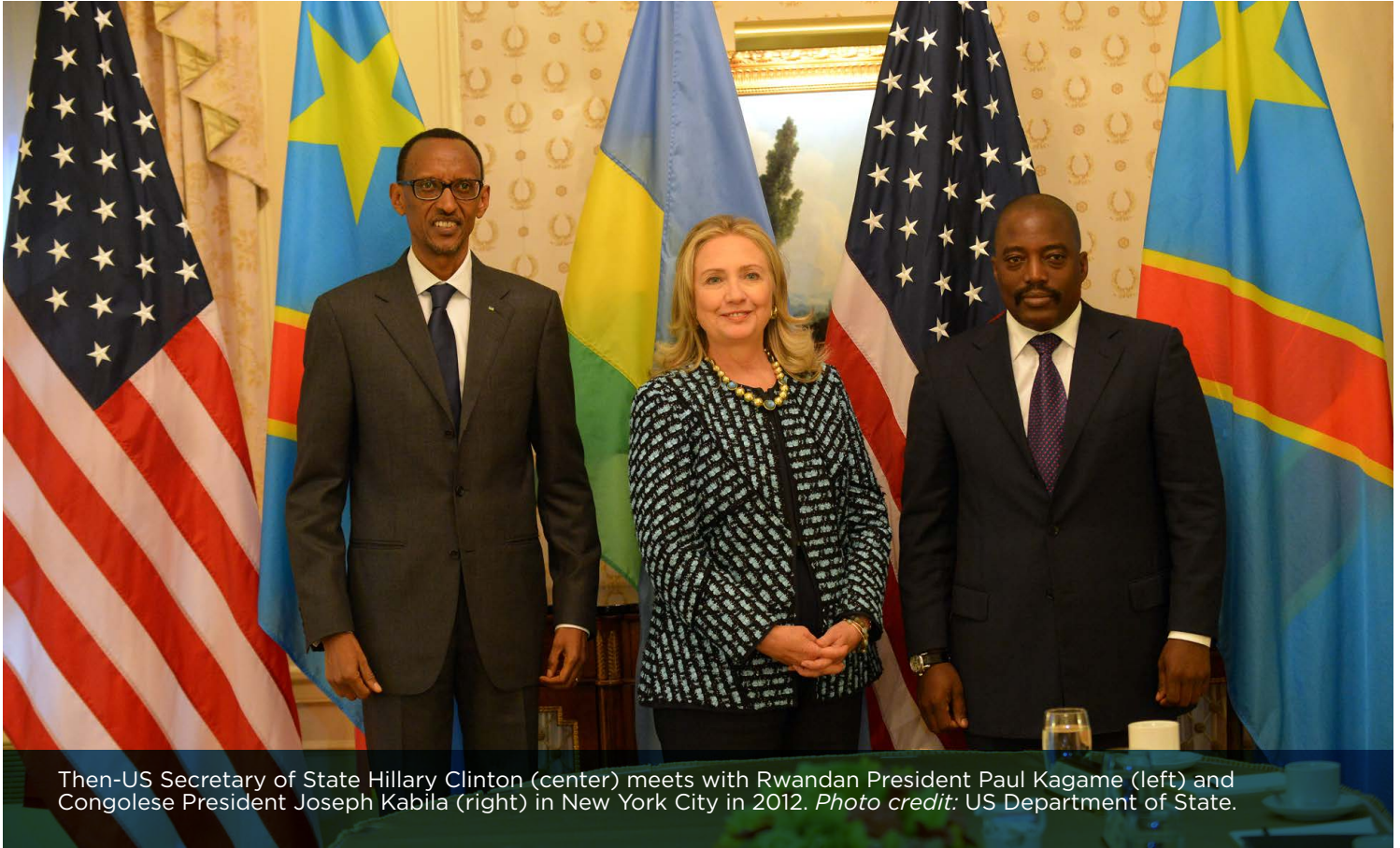
6 Quote attributed to Frantz Fanon by several sources. See, for example, “New fingers on Zaire’s trigger,” *Africa Confidential*, May 9, 1997, vol 38, no 10, http://www.africa-confidential.com/article-preview/id/5570/New_fingers_on_Za%C3%AFre%27s_trigger; Verity Mould, “State Failure and Civil Society Potential: Reconciliation in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” *Journal of Conflict, Transformation & Security*, July 2011, p. 73, cesran.org/jcts.

7 Adam Hochschild, *King’s Leopold’s Ghosts* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

8 Thomas Kanza, *The Rise and Fall of Patrice Lumumba* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1979).

9 T.M. Callaghy, *The State Society Struggle: Zaire in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) and S. Weissman, *American Foreign Policy in the Congo (1960-1964)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974) for the US policy approach.

10 This was a term used only half-jokingly by many Africans.



Then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (center) meets with Rwandan President Paul Kagame (left) and Congolese President Joseph Kabila (right) in New York City in 2012. *Photo credit: US Department of State.*

time peace was achieved, the Congo faced many serious issues that had been neglected in the interim.¹¹

Despite the peace initiatives, in many respects the great African war never ended. The provinces of the Congo that border Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi—North and South Kivu—are ethnically diverse but populated by a large number of Banyarwanda, people who are Congolese citizens yet ethnically Rwandan. Traffic between the Banyarwanda and Rwanda was commonplace and remained so during and after the war. Many militias and mining operators, who came to populate the Kivus, were either direct proxies of Rwanda or, conversely, ethnic militias determined to beat back Rwanda's influence in the Congo. (Many others were purely criminal enterprises.)

¹¹ For a good description of that prolonged and demanding peace process, see Philip Winter, *A Sacred Cause* (Moray: Librario Publishers, 2012).

By 2012, the last Rwandan proxy militia, the March 23 Movement (M23), had been forced out of the Congo and obliged to take refuge in Uganda. However, due to a combination of factors, including the prevailing lack of security in the Kivus, the abusive behavior of Congolese national security forces, and the continuing competition for conflict minerals, the situation in this eastern Congo region has scarcely improved. Indeed, local militias now seem to have evolved from combatants in a regional war to armed and violent pressure groups whose goal is to focus the attention of the distant central government on the problems of the overpopulated and underdeveloped Kivus. In the main, they have failed. At the latest count, there were seventy armed groups still active in the Kivus.¹² Though these groups pose no conceivable threat to far-away Kinshasa, they have, nonetheless, prevented the emergence of either reliable stability or

¹² Jason Stearns and Christoph Vogel, *The Landscape of Armed Groups in the Eastern Congo* (New York: Congo Research Group, December 2015).

economic development in the eastern Congo, effectively robbing the region of its rich economic potential and condemning its citizens to a continuing cycle of abuse and poverty.¹³

US Interests in the Congo

The United States and its allies have multiple reasons to engage in the Congo, ranging from “hard” security and economic concerns to humanitarian imperatives.

Security and stability

The most urgent issue in the Congo today is the significant threat of local and regional instability as a result of President Kabila’s unlawful extension of his term. Kabila lacks the military muscle to contain the significant civil unrest that is likely to result from his efforts to remain in power, and that may consequently spread in turn to the rest of the region. Instability resulting from a similar election dispute in neighboring Burundi, for example, has led nearly 240,000 refugees to flee the country, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.¹⁴

The Great Lakes region is explosive, dangerous, and unpredictable—and the warning lights are blinking again. In addition to the uncertainty provoked by Kabila’s political maneuvers, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham seems determined to adopt Africa as its battleground. The Islamic State’s foothold thus far has predominantly been in areas where Islam has endured for centuries. However, recent reports suggest links among some rather unsavory characters around Congolese mineral wealth and the eastern Congo’s well-established smuggling routes, including groups such as the Ugandan guerrillas called the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).¹⁵ ADF is a noxious organization, which is built on ethnic and Islamic identities and lives on clandestine support from Sudan, as it launches hit-and-run raids over the western border of Uganda in an attempt to undermine President Yoweri Museveni. Their presence in the eastern Congo seems connected to smuggling and creates a connection among the DRC, Uganda, and Somalia: Of an estimated 10,000 kilograms (kg) of gold produced in the DRC yearly, a 2013 study found that only 181 kg were legally commercialized.¹⁶ New reports suggest that the profits

from the illegal gold smuggling—formerly funnelled by corrupt security forces or politicians toward personal ends—are increasingly becoming a funding source for terror groups, including ADF and al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Somalia, al Shabab.¹⁷ History is dynamic, and as Chinese Communist Party leader Chairman Mao Zedong used to say, “A single spark can start a prairie fire.”¹⁸ African Muslim groups are being subjected to intense radical proselytization, and their presence in any area of conflict is not to be treated lightly.

Clearly, the DRC is already deeply unstable. When Kabila forced a constitutional modification through the parliament in January 2015, clashes between protestors and riot police amid public demonstrations resulted in the death of forty-two individuals.¹⁹ Only a few months later, the ADF killed more than four hundred peasants in the Beni area of the eastern Congo. At the same time, Rwanda’s President Kagame still dreams of restoring Tutsi power in Burundi and is using the porous eastern Congo as a springboard for his ambitions, funneling support to Burundian opposition groups.²⁰ A 2016 United Nations Security Council report, for example, accused Rwanda of recruiting and training Burundian refugees to oust Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza from power militarily.²¹

Kabila has blithely ignored these threats.²² Tension on the DRC’s borders, whether between Uganda

smuggled to Uganda,” *East African*, February 8, 2014, <http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/Smuggled--400m-DR-Congo-gold-fuels-war-/-/2558/2198074/-/fe8utcz/-/index.html>.

- 17 Sebastian Gatimu, “The True Cost of Mineral Smuggling in the DRC,” Institute of Security Studies, January 11, 2016, <https://www.issafrica.org/iss-today/the-true-cost-of-mineral-smuggling-in-the-drc>.
- 18 Mao Zedong, “Selected Works of Mao-Tse-tung,” January 5, 1930, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_6.htm.
- 19 Aaron Ross, “Church backs Congo protestors, rights group says 42 killed,” Reuters, January 21, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-congodemocratic-politics-protests-idUSKBNOKU0UI20150121>.
- 20 “Le M23 dément les accusations de liens avec les infiltrés burundais,” RFI Afrique, January 8, 2016, [http://afkinsider.com/109763/is-rwanda-supporting-rebels-in-burundis-conflict/#thash.EhZBDBDy.dpuf](http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20160108-m23-rdc-burundi-rebelles-infiltrés-; Kevin Mwanza, “Is Rwanda Supporting Rebels in Burundi’s Conflict?” <i>AFK Insider</i>, January 12, 2016, <a href=).
- 21 Michelle Nichols and Louis Charbonneau, “Exclusive: Burundi Rebels Say Trained by Rwandan Military - UN Experts,” Reuters, February 3, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-burundi-rwanda-un-idUSKCN0VD04K>.
- 22 See International Crisis Group, “Congo: Ending the Status Quo,” December 17, 2014, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/central-africa/dr-congo/b107-congo-ending-the-status-quo.aspx>;

13 Ibid.

14 UNHCR, “Refugees from Burundi: Post-Influx,” <http://data.unhcr.org/burundi/regional.php>.

15 Author interviews.

16 Kevin J. Kelley, “EA fingered in \$400m worth of DR Congo gold



Artisanal miners work in the DRC. Particularly in the country's east, unregulated mining poses a threat to workers' health and the environment. *Photo credit:* Responsible Sourcing Network.

and Sudan or between Rwanda and Burundi, may presumably be used as a pretext for declaring a state of emergency—and a more convincing excuse for delaying elections than the need to update the voter rolls. But this tactic is akin to lighting a cigarette in an ammunitions storage room. In 1996, an entire third of Africa erupted into war from an eerily similar mixture of internal, sub-regional, and regional quarrels.

New markets and economic interests

With an estimated \$24 trillion of untapped mineral potential, the DRC probably has more reserves of mineral resources than any other country on earth, ranging from copper, gold, and diamonds to cobalt, uranium, coltan, and oil.²³ Notably, the country holds 45 percent of the world's cobalt reserves and

produces more than half of the world's supply of the mineral,²⁴ commonly used in aircraft components and rechargeable batteries. But the DRC exploits only a fraction of its mineral potential, and in a very inefficient way. Since the "African World War" ended in 2002, private investors have entered the country but often in a non-transparent and non-competitive way, obtaining their stakes in an illegal, cut-throat bribery competition.

Corruption in the mining sector today remains a major impediment to sustainable economic growth. The country's poor infrastructure and unreliable power supply compound the issue, driving the cost of doing business up for foreign companies. In September, Swiss mining company Glencore plc suspended its copper and cobalt operations for eighteen months, ostensibly to conduct necessary upgrades to its operations, but

International Crisis Group, "Congo: Is Democratic Change Possible?" May 5, 2015, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/central-africa/dr-congo/225-congo-is-democratic-change-possible.aspx>.

23 Paul Trustfull, "A Man with a Vision," *Forbes Custom*, <http://www.forbescustom.com/EmergingMarketsPgs/DRCongoP1.html>.

24 KPMG Global Mining Institute, "Democratic Republic of Congo," 2014, <https://www.kpmg.com/Global/en/IssuesAndInsights/ArticlesPublications/mining-country-guides/Documents/democratic-republic-congo-mining-guide.pdf>, p. 20.

falling commodities prices were undoubtedly a driving factor.²⁵ The impact of the move on local employment is not yet known.

The industry is further undermined by the tens of thousands of illegal *creuseurs* (or diggers) that have swarmed on abandoned mines or along the periphery of ill-defined mining boundaries, working in atrocious conditions for a variety of brutal taskmasters,²⁶ ranging from rogue mining companies to tribal militias and even, unofficially, for the national army, the *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC). Foreign buyers, themselves ranging from respectable European companies operating through Central Asian proxies, to independent Chinese traders, and even to some official private mining concerns, buy the raw minerals, commercializing them in often questionable ways. The tax benefits accruing to the Congolese state from these purchases are pitiful relative to the volume of the exploitation.²⁷ Moreover, the Congolese state often does little to ensure compliance with existing environmental regulations, and contamination of the water table, air, and soil remains an ongoing health hazard for communities in and around mining sites.

Developing the Congo's economic potential will be impossible without security reform. The FARDC is not an army in the traditional sense of the word; it is a collage of ethnic, political, and regional proxy militias that have never been effectively integrated under a unified command. It remains a poorly-disciplined, dangerous force that often provokes more fear among the civilian population than the "armed rebels" it is supposed to fight. Anti-rebel offensives by the FARDC invariably result in massive population displacement, as civilians

vote with their feet in a desperate search for security. The presence of extremely lucrative mineral deposits, the armed unrest of small but significant parts of the population, and the security forces' inability to enforce the rule of law (coupled with their own frequent human rights violations) constitute a kind of triple whammy that condemns the eastern Congo to a vicious cycle of recurring insecurity. The dearth of lawful employment opportunities makes this cycle hard to break, but given the extraordinary economic potential of the region, the problem is a lack of political will, coupled with corruption and poor governance, not a shortage of resources.

Humanitarian imperatives

In August 2009, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton travelled to the eastern Congo, becoming the highest-level US visitor ever to that war-torn region. She appeared to be genuinely shocked by the severity of the human rights violations she saw: Studies suggest that roughly 40 percent of women and 24 percent of men in the eastern Congo have been exposed to sexual violence;²⁸ sexual violence, and specifically rape, was especially pervasive between 2006 and 2007, during which time an estimated 7 percent of women in North Kivu were raped at least once.²⁹ The 2013 documentary *L'homme qui répare les femmes*, which featured Congolese gynecologist and surgeon Denis Mukwege's work treating women after rape and sexual assault, was censored and banned in the DRC last year, prompting accusations that the Congolese government was trying to downplay the full extent of the sexual violence.³⁰

Given the extraordinary economic potential of the region, the problem is a lack of political will . . . not a shortage of resources.

25 Matthew Hill and Thomas Wilson, "Glencore Zambia Move to Halt 26 percent of Country's Copper Output," Bloomberg Business, September 7, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-09-07/glencore-zambian-move-to-halt-26-of-country-s-copper-output>.

26 These unregulated minors often face atrocious health and safety precautions, low salaries, and limited safeguards against the exploitation of child laborers.

27 The obsolete carré (square) system by which companies pay their lease according to the surface they hold has encouraged the parallel development of unregistered artisanal exploitation.

28 Kristen Johnson, Jennifer Scott, Bigy Rughita, et al, "Association of Sexual Violence and Human Rights Violations With Physical and Mental Health in Territories of the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, vol. 304, no. 5, 2010, pp. 553-562.

29 Jo Adetunji, "Forty-eight women raped every hour in Congo, study finds," *Guardian*, May 12, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/12/48-women-raped-hour-congo>.

30 Ludovica Iaccino, "DR Congo bans documentary of surgeon Denis Mukwege who treated 40,000 women raped in conflict," *International Business Times*, September 3, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/dr-congo-bans-documentary-surgeon-denis-mukwege-who-treated-40000-women-raped-conflict-1518315>.

Approximately 2.7 million Congolese are internally displaced and another 430,000 remain refugees in neighboring countries as a result of this violence.³¹ Many of the internally displaced migrate to the relatively wealthy region of Katanga, where they find work in the mining sector. This practice poses special risks for children of the displaced, as the illegal mining sector allegedly employs a large number of child laborers. (In 2012, the United Nations Children’s Fund estimated that 40,000 children—nearly one-third of the sector’s total labor force—were working in mines in southern Katanga,³² though officials in the mining industry dispute these statistics.)

In recent months, a new humanitarian imperative has emerged: President Kabila has blocked legally adopted children from leaving the country to join their new families.³³ Following her 2009 visit, Clinton’s outrage produced a \$16 million initiative on gender and sexual violence,³⁴ which was followed later by a \$20 million aid program to support livelihoods.³⁵ Initiatives are needed, but they are not substitutes for security reform, implementation of the rule of law, and improvements in governance; many of the factors underlying citizens’ vulnerability to exploitation and sexual violence remain unaddressed.³⁶

Democracy promotion and good governance

The appalling lack of governance in the DRC is particularly relevant now, as the problem has reached crisis proportions. President Joseph Kabila, who has been in power for fifteen years (five years as unelected head of the transitional government, from 2001 to 2006, and then two five-year mandates following disputed elections), is ineligible to run again. Nevertheless, while declaring respect for the constitution, Kabila is attempting an end-run around Congolese law. Citing Article 8 of the constitution, he claims that it is not lawful to hold elections without first updating the voter lists, a process that his government says may take anywhere from one to four years—resulting in a delay so significant that it would effectively amount to another term in office.

Kabila’s argument is typical of what African journalists have been calling “the successful last stand of the dinosaurs.”³⁷ All across the continent, long-serving presidents are discreetly prolonging their mandates at the helm of state: Some use artfully organized referendums (as for example, in the Republic of the Congo and Rwanda); others change the constitution (Uganda, Djibouti, and Chad). One country, Burundi, has simply ignored the electoral laws amidst great civil unrest and violence.

President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and President Paul Kagame of Rwanda have so effectively stifled dissent that they are securely in control of their political environments and would be re-elected without even having to rig the vote. Burundi’s President Pierre Nkurunziza, however, has opened a dangerous and violent breach in the slow-moving continental process of promoting democratic reforms and building good governance through his efforts to remain in power. As one of the largest countries in Africa and a lynchpin of regional security, the DRC is an important front in the African public’s revolt against “Presidents for life.”

31 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *UNHCR Global Appeal Update 2015-Democratic Republic of the Congo*, <http://www.unhcr.org/5461e5fd16.html>.

32 Cornelia Walther, “In DR Congo, UNICEF supports efforts to help child labourers return to school,” United Nations Children’s Fund, June 13, 2012, http://www.unicef.org/childsurvival/drcongo_62627.html.

33 J. Peter Pham, “No Exit,” *US News and World Report*, September 4, 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/world-report/2015/09/04/congo-president-joseph-kabila-uses-adopted-children-as-pawns>.

34 US Agency for International Development, “Ushindi-Overcoming Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Eastern Congo,” 2010-2015, <http://map.usaid.gov/PublicProjectDetail?id=a0cd00000012ysvAAA&cid=Democratic%20Republic%20of%20the%20Congo>. The Ushindi project was a five-year (2010 to 2015) USAID-funded program to support sexual violence survivors. Additional programs, including the Care, Access, Safety, and Empowerment Program in Eastern Congo (\$13 million over five years), work in conjunction and toward similar aims. See US Agency for International Development, “Care, Access, Safety, and Empowerment (CASE) Program in Eastern Congo,” <http://map.usaid.gov/PublicProjectDetail?id=a0cd00000012ysvAAA&cid=Democratic%20Republic%20of%20the%20Congo>.

35 US Agency for International Development, “Community Recovery and Livelihoods Programme,” 2012-2016, <http://map.usaid.gov/PublicProjectDetail?id=a0cd00000012yu7AAA&cid=Democratic%20Republic%20of%20the%20Congo>.

36 Marcy Hersh, *Congolese Women: What Happened to the Promise to Protect?* Refugees International, 2015, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ri_drc_field_report-web.pdf.

Victims’ frustrations with the Congolese government response to addressing sexual and gender-based violence can be summed up by a Refugees’ International survey respondent: “We were very happy that Hillary Clinton came to Goma. But it’s not normal that the US and other countries send delegations of their foreign ministers to meet with sexual violence survivors here, while the Congolese government fails to engage in addressing this issue in its own country” (22).

37 Marwane Ben Yahmed, “2016, l’année des marathons présidentiels,” *Jeune Afrique*, January 11, 2016, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/292569/politique/2016-lannee-marathons-presidentiels/>.

Conclusion: Why the Congo matters

The largest country in sub-Saharan Africa, with the geographical positioning, economic potential, and sheer social dynamism that should have put it at the top tier of states on the continent, has a gross national income per capita of \$650.³⁸

The Congo is full of so many things—problems, potential, dynamic citizens, gigantic spaces, unparalleled natural resources—but is too often empty of political imagination. The population is extremely tired of the antics of both soldiers and politicians, whether national or foreign. Having been ravaged by the worst war on the planet since 1945, the Congolese are still waiting for the effects of that war to truly end. The DRC is waiting for all the things that the twenty-first century is supposed to bring: good governance, accountability, respect for human rights, health, education, gender equality, and the sheer enjoyment of *le grand et beau pays* (“the great and beautiful country”). There is hope that with the necessary reforms, it can have all these things. But it needs help in managing itself, and it is in the interest of the United States to provide this assistance. As Frantz Fanon noted, the Congo is a trigger; engaging with the country at such a vital juncture might prove a timely safety mechanism.

There is still time to prevent a new conflagration in the Great Lakes, but not much. Burundi, which had been held up as a model of international peacemaking (as

well as African peacekeeping), already has started to implode. The Congo could be next, and it still provides a ready battleground for the region’s innumerable proxy conflicts. How long will it be before the contagion of violence spreads and what can be done to stop it?

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One of the foremost Africanists in the world today, Prunier is the author of more than 200 scholarly articles and a dozen books in four languages, including in English *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (Columbia University Press, 1995), *Darfur: A 21st Century Genocide* (Cornell University Press, 2005)—which was hailed by Foreign Affairs as “the best available account of the Darfur crisis”—and *Africa’s World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of Continental Catastrophe* (Oxford University Press, 2008), which was awarded a special honorable mention in the Council on Foreign Relations’ 2010 Arthur Ross Book Award competition for the best book published in international relations, the first Africa-focused book ever so honored.

This issue brief is made possible through generous support from United for Africa’s Democratic Future.



³⁸ World Bank, World Development Indicators, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/home.aspx>. The DRC’s gross national income per capita is based on purchasing power parity.

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