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Overview

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Democratic Republic of the Congo Overview

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Environment

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a vast country of great geographical diversity. It borders [Angola](#) and [Zambia](#) in the south, [Tanzania](#), [Burundi](#), [Rwanda](#) and [Uganda](#) in the east, [Sudan](#) and [the Central African Republic](#) in the north, and [the Republic of Congo](#) (Congo-Brazzaville) in the west. The country takes its name from the Congo River, at the mouth of which the DRC has a tiny but strategic Atlantic coastline. A string of lakes, including Lake Tanganyika, line the DRC's eastern border. These have provided the topography for arguably the world's most destructive irregular warfare in recent generations. Most of the country has a tropical climate and vegetation; grasslands in the north, mountains in the east, and drier plateaus in the south are the exceptions. The DRC has immense mineral wealth, including copper, gold, diamonds, coltan, cobalt and manganese, but these resources have proved a curse rather than a blessing.

Peoples

Main languages: French (official), Lingala, Kikongo, Tshiluba, Swahili

Main religions: Christianity (mainly Roman Catholicism but also burgeoning evangelical Protestantism in urban areas), Kimbanguinism, a highly personalised neo-Christian belief system prevalent in the south west; traditional magico-religious systems, and Islam. Overlaps between one or more of these practices are commonplace.

The hundreds of ethno-linguistic groups include [Kasaians](#), [Banyarwanda](#), Hunde, Nyanga, Nande, Bangala, [Batwa and Bambuti](#). (Adequate statistics are unavailable.)

For a country with a population of almost 60 million, variously assessed as having 250 ethnic groups and up to 700 languages and dialects, definitions of minorities are complex even by the standards of the region. Ethnicity, while a powerful mobilizing force in politics, has been a particularly fluid and changeable category, linguistic and regional agglomerations being overlaid with factors of religion, class and education. Nor are the most vulnerable minorities necessarily the smallest or most marginalized.

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History

From early times densely forested areas have been home to communally organized hunting and gathering bands of 'Pygmies', a catch-all term covering the Batwa of the eastern borders through to the Baka groupings on the border with Congo-Brazzaville and the Central African Republic. On the forest fringes and rivers, agricultural and fishing communities showed much greater social and economic differentiation. By the fifteenth century powerful kingdoms had developed in the south and west of the country. The largest of these was the Kingdom of Kongo, which extended in all directions from the mouth of the Congo River. Portuguese explorers arrived towards the end of the 15th century, followed by missionaries. Slave traders arrived soon after, and engaged in booming business with the Kingdom of Kongo, which had previously applied the practice in local wars of conquest. The European connection accelerated slave raids and contributed to a significant depopulation of the continent's interior.

In 1881 King Leopold II of [Belgium](#) organized a unique variety of colonialism in what is now DRC, vesting himself with sole ownership of the entire territory and following such brutal and exploitative policies as to cause, even then, an international outcry. Congolese were enslaved en masse to collect rubber, ivory, and other resources for the Belgian king and his concessionaires; communities that didn't produce faced brutal collective punishment, including the amputation of hands and execution. Leopold's hellish 'Congo Free State' regime is thought to have caused the deaths of 10 million Congolese-and perhaps as many as three times that number. From 1908, in response to the first sustained international human rights campaign, the territory was taken out of Leopold's personal possession and became a regular colony of the Belgian state, called the Belgian Congo.

Change only came slowly, and forced labour continued, even if formally banned. Belgian rule relied heavily on customary local authorities, though this often involved the disruption of pre-existing political relations, the creation and manipulation of chieftainships, and the entrenchment of ethnic divisions. This process was also reinforced by an educational system, implemented mainly by the Catholic Church and confined almost entirely to primary level, which favoured certain regions, additionally serving to formalize linguistic divisions. From the 1920s resistance was primarily expressed through messianic movements, notably Kimbanguists and Jehovah's Witnesses, whose supporters faced persecution before and after independence. The latter group in particular remain controversial in the political centre, Kinshasa (formally Léopoldville).

Pro-independence sentiment steadily gained ground through the 1940s and 1950s. Congolese chafed ever more at white privilege and colonial constraints, and in January 1959 massive rioting shook the capital, Léopoldville (now Kinshasa). A deep divide within the independence movement pitted advocates of federalism against advocates of a unitary state. Federalists claimed that with the country's size and diversity, it would be impossible to insist on unity in the short-term; 'unitarists', who took inspiration from pan-Africanism, argued that federalists were really separatists, and suspected that it was no coincidence that advocates of federalism tended to come from richer provinces, especially mineral-rich Katanga.

Belgian opposition to the radical unitarist nationalism of Patrice Lumumba's Mouvement National Congolais (MNC) encouraged the escalation of regional and ethnically based parties during the hectic transition to independence. At Congolese independence in June 1960, federalist Joseph Kasavubu became president, and Lumumba became prime minister. Immediately the southern province of Katanga, which has had strong economic links to neighbouring Zambia for centuries, declared independence. A prolonged period of chaos and civil war followed, in which regional and ethnic factors came to the fore. Lumumba was arrested at the end of 1960 and executed two months later, with the connivance of Belgian and American secret service operatives: at the height of the Cold War Washington in particular disfavoured Lumumba's socialism. UN forces were dispatched to Katanga, and in 1963 Katangan leader Moïse Tschombe revoked the province's secession; President Kasavubu appointed him prime minister the following year.

In 1965 western-backed General Joseph-Desiré Mobutu came to power through a coup. Despite the continuation of insurrectionary movements in Katanga and in the north-eastern province of Orientale, Mobutu at first achieved comparative stability by the ruthless suppression of opposition and by increasing the concentration of power in presidential hands. In 1971 he took the name Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga ('The all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, goes from conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake and arising from the blood and ashes of his enemies like the sun which conquers the night'). He also renamed the country 'Zaire' as part of a campaign of African authenticity. Mobutu extended the legacy of Léopold and Belgium, not so much governing Zaire, but plundering it for his own wealth and power, while servicing the parallel networks of patronage and reward that constituted his own conception of African political economy.

Zaire's costly defeat alongside the United States and South Africa in Angola in 1975 combined with economic collapse tied to falling copper prices and disastrous economic policies to provoke a succession of army mutinies. Renewed rebellion broke out in Shaba (Mobutu's name for Katanga), which was only suppressed with the help of Moroccan and later French and Belgian troops, helped by considerable numbers of informally recruited French and other mercenaries. Increasingly Mobutu moved members of his own [Ngbandi](#) and related groups - Lingala speakers from Equateur province - into positions of power, particularly within the elaborate security apparatus. A decade after his overthrow, many of these individuals, often operating with great economic independence, remain influential within the 'shadow economy' of Congolese power politics.

Instability, indebtedness and economic decline, combined with gross corruption and pervasive human rights violations, continued through the 1980s without threatening the support from Mobutu's external backers until the end of the decade and the end of the Cold War. External pressure led to the formal establishment of multiparty politics in 1990, but the political parties that emerged - some 230 of them - were little more than kinship corporations, vying to control elements of Mobutu's decaying patronage apparatus. Increasing popular discontent exploded into widespread rioting in many cities in 1991, following army massacres of students (the actual scale of which is contested by some) in Lubumbashi and of demonstrators in Kinshasa. In 1992 Mobutu launched a pogrom against the Kasaï in Shaba (Katanga) province, but it became increasingly clear that his grip on power was slipping: the Kasaïan episode itself was rapidly co-opted by Mobutu-appointed regional governors for their own ends of power, prestige and access to resources. The same year, a long-postponed all-party Sovereign National Conference, with transition to democracy on its agenda, elected Etienne Tshisekedi as prime minister.

This precipitated a crisis with the military and with Mobutu, who refused to ratify the appointment and the provisional constitution. In 1993 the country had rival governments and rival prime ministers. One response of pro-Mobutu factions was to play the 'ethnic card' with a vengeance, precipitating further anti-Kasaïan riots and mass expulsions - apparently following a strategy equating democracy with instability and ethnic hatred, as a justification for blocking reform and maintaining Mobutu in power. Mobutu's control of the central bank and other sources of finance, combined with rivalries among Tshisekedi's supporters, enabled him to gain the upper hand in 1994. A period of hyperinflation outstripping anything yet seen in Sub-Saharan Africa ensued, accompanied by the dollarisation of the economy in urban areas, and the reversion to a combination of forced self-sufficiency and anarchic pillage in rural zones. What was left of the transportation and communications networks outside Kinshasa's inner suburbs fell apart.

Following the 1994 genocide in neighbouring Rwanda, many Hutu extremist perpetrators joined hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees who feared retribution in eastern Zaire. From there, the militants, with the support of Mobutu, launched attacks on the new Rwandan government, as well as on Congolese Tutsi, the Banyamulenge. In 1996 Rwanda and Uganda sent their own forces into eastern

Zaire. They deployed the veteran Lumumbist rebel Laurent Kabila, an associate of the Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara, in a westward sweep toward Kinshasa, backed largely by swahiliphone armed forces often only nominally under his control. In the process, Rwandan government forces and Kabila's forces killed thousands of Hutus: combatants and non-combatants alike. Meanwhile, in 1996, 50,000 marched in Kinshasa to protest Mobutu's continued rule, one month before the announcement that the dictator had prostate cancer. In early 1997, South African President Nelson Mandela and an American envoy hosted a meeting between Mobutu and Kabila, and urged Mobutu to step down. He finally fled the country as Kabila and his allies took Kinshasa in May 1997. The predicted massacre of the capital's inhabitants did not take place. Even before Kabila's forces had reached the capital, though, new contracts had been signed between Kabila and American mining companies for exploitation of copper and other resources. The fallout--legal, economic, and military--continues to the present.

Kabila renamed the country the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). However, he quickly fell out with Rwanda and Uganda, and in 1998 these countries sponsored rebel movements to invade the DRC anew. The rebels also had the support of the then Tutsi-dominated Burundian securocracy, while the Kabila government had that of Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia, at least two of which were ambitious to expand their economic footprint in the DRC's potentially huge resources of exploitable minerals. Seven nations were now directly involved, and because their various roles were often rewarded in natural resource concessions, they had little incentive to withdraw. Other countries, from Chad to Ukraine, were involved through the supply of armaments, personnel, banking and money laundering facilities. Media circles began referring to the DRC crisis as 'Africa's First World War'. Fighting continued despite a July 1999 ceasefire agreement and deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission (MONUC) in 2000 that was understaffed and had a weak mandate. A study by the International Rescue Committee found that between 1998 and 2004, nearly four million people in the DRC--the equivalent of the entire population of Ireland--died as a result of the war.

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Governance

Through a combination of neo-Maoist ideology, stubborn Congolese nationalism, and lack of easily mobilised personnel and resources, Laurent Kabila never managed fully to impose order upon the Kinshasa region, let alone the rest of the country and its relations with the outside world. He rapidly lost friends around the globe. Kabila was assassinated in January 2001 by one of his own Swahili-speaking bodyguards of eastern-DRC origin - although who coordinated the killing remains unknown. His son Joseph Kabila assumed the presidency amid frequent accusations among Kinshasa opposition circles that he is a Rwandan adoptee or even an impostor.. Under international pressure in 2002, he entered into a power-sharing government with rebel factions and civil society in July 2003. Like his father, Joseph Kabila's reach barely extended beyond Kinshasa; a vacuum of power persisted in most of the country, especially the east, and was filled by various and competing militia factions, as well as destitute army units who paid themselves by stealing and terrorizing local populations. Joseph Kabila's hold on power was particularly tenuous because he was raised in the Swahili-speaking Katanga province and Tanzania, and his command of Lingala, spoken in Kinshasa and elsewhere in the west, is not fluent. Violence in north-eastern Ituri province flared despite improved security in Kinshasa, and French-led EU peacekeepers intervened in 2003 to quell the violence in and around Ituri's capital Bunia. In July 2003 and October 2004 the UN Security Council bolstered MONUC to a nearly 17,000-strong force, and gave it a new mandate to protect civilians 'under imminent threat of violence'.

The National Assembly adopted a new constitution in May 2005. The document limited the president to a maximum of two five-year terms, decentralized some powers, and generally weakened the executive in favour of the legislative branch. During the war, hatred had been stirred up against the Banyamulenge

people in particular through demagogic accusations that the group was 'foreign' (more specifically, Rwandan); the new constitution defined as citizens every ethnic group that had been present at independence in 1960, a definition that includes the Banyamulenge.

In 2006, the first free elections for 40 years, they were won by the incumbent Joseph Kabila with an estimated 58 per cent of the vote, mostly from the Swahili-speaking east, creating concern about his ability to overcome the divide with the Lingala-speaking west. Despite initial court challenges, his main opponent Jean-Pierre Bemba - a former rebel from the Equateur region - signalled he would accept the result.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) based in The Hague has jurisdiction over crimes committed in the DRC since 1 July 2002, following the ratification of the Rome Statute of the Court by the DRC on 11 April 2002. On 19 April 2004 the president of the DRC referred the situation of crimes committed in the DRC to the ICC's Prosecutor. As a result, militia leader Thomas Lubanga was surrendered to the Hague-based court in March 2006, and on October 18, 2007, the ICC formally indicted Germain Katanga, one of the key military leaders of the FNI, for crimes against humanity, among other charges, after he was handed over by the Congolese authorities.

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Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

In the year following the relatively peaceful election of Joseph Kabila as president, few of the DRC's underlying problems showed signs of being solved. In and around Kinshasa, the possibility of widespread violent social unrest remains ever-present, despite the efforts of the UN peacekeeping mission (MONUC) to bolster security infrastructures, but the worst of the continuing Congolese crisis is in the east.

The key factor remains the ongoing crises in the Kivu provinces, Katanga and Ituri. The upswing in violence seen in North Kivu in mid-2007 was the most recent episode in the continuing struggle for resources and local control between Congolese Tutsi (known as Banyamulenge) militias and the Hutu *interahamwe* of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), as well as independent raiding groups of often indeterminate allegiance who are looking for material resources rather than any strategic or political advantage. The renegade army officer General Laurent Nkunda, who has been faced with an international arrest warrant for war crimes since 2005, had been maintaining what he describes as the defence of the Banyamulenge. The Nkunda uprising began in earnest in December 2006, provoking immediate population flight estimated at 370,000 people, as the conflict rapidly became a four-cornered one, between Nkunda's National Congress for the People's Defence, FDLR bands, Congolese army units and Mai-Mai militias with little allegiance but to themselves. Attempts by the Congolese army to conquer Nkunda and his force (estimated at 6,000 - 10,000 strong) proved futile. In September 2007, an estimated further 170,000 civilians had fled fighting. Officials from the UN mission in Congo (MONUC) reported locating mass graves of unidentified civilians in areas previously occupied by units of Nkunda's Bravo Brigades. By late 2007, the rebel leader was calling for peace talks - something which Kabila had previously refused to consider, demanding instead that Nkunda integrate his force into the national army.

The Banyamulenge Tutsi issue is an old one in the DRC, dating back to the colonial era, with eastern Congolese Tutsis being marginalised under the former Congolese head of state, Mobutu Sese Seko. Although Banyamulenge were closely associated with his successor, Laurent Kabila, this relationship soured rapidly in the 1999-2001 period, which ended with Kabila's assassination by one of his own

Swahili-speaking guard. This resulted in yet more popular anger in the capital Kinshasa, with Banyamulenge being aggressively stereotyped as 'non-Congolese' and an effective fifth column for neighbouring Rwanda - whose ruling RPF come from the minority Tutsi ethnic group. Many Banyamulenge fled the capital at this time, fearing attack, and sought sanctuary back in the East.

The events in Eastern Congo in 2007 are a continuance of the poisonous ethnic strife which led to the genocide of minority Tutsis and Hutu moderates in Rwanda in 1994. Beyond Nkunda's immediate circumstances, the long-term issue of the insecurity of the Banyamulenge minority in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and how they may best combat this, remains unresolved. The Banyamulenge themselves are divided over the way to a solution. Most acknowledged Banyamulenge political thinkers are in favour of a negotiated political solution, but disapprove strongly of the lack of Banyamulenge representation at either parliament or Senate level. In addition, prejudice against Banyamulenge interests remains entrenched in Kinshasa, including within the administration.

In Ituri, 2007 saw considerable progress in the demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration of the six militias that had emerged along ethnic lines since 1999. Coordinated by the UN and the Congolese armed forces, the initiative achieved a major success with the adherence to the process of the last of the main militias to have held out against it, the Lendu Nationalist Integrationist Front (FNI). Many of the FNI and other demobilised fighters were expected to join to the armed forces. The Ituri conflict has always had a complex ethnic aspect to it, most obviously in the stoking up of mutual hatred between Hema and Lendu from 1999 onwards, the work of local warlords as well as Rwanda's and Uganda's interference in the region. However, like other such regional conflicts in DRC in the past decade, the violence has not merely been identitarian. As elsewhere, the control of resources has been at the centre of the conflict. On October 18, 2007, the International Criminal Court formally indicted Germain Katanga, one of the key military leaders of the FNI, for crimes against humanity, among other charges, after he was handed over by the Congolese authorities.

Among minority populations suffering particularly from the continuing conflict in the east are the Congolese Batwa/Bambutu. In South Kivu, continuing attacks by Rwandan rebel forces in the countryside outside Bukavu have a grave effect on the Batwa/Bambutu as on other communities. Pillage, torture and killings are common, and there is a particularly high incidence of rape and extreme sexual violence. In North Kivu, some Batwa/Bambutu communities have been caught in the large waves of displacement caused by the ongoing fighting between forces loyal to Nkunda, Congolese Mai-Mai, and the Congolese armed forces. Further north in Ituri, the situation in areas of Bambutu population was calmer during the course of 2006-7, although some parts of the district are threatened by the presence of hardcore FRPI fighters who have refused to join the demobilization programme. Throughout the region, the chronic poverty and marginalization experienced by Batwa / Bambutu communities is exacerbated by the security situation.

Control over forest resources continued to be of critical importance to the Batwa/Bambutu. In late 2007, a leaked report from a World Bank Inspection Panel said that the bank had backed an environmentally-damaging logging project, without consulting with the Batwa, or considering the impact on their communities. Recently, a coalition of organisations based around forest peoples' groups have also been lobbying at the UN against what they regard as a deficient government response to the plight of the forest peoples. Following the government's presentation in 2006 of its State Party report to the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, this grouping replied in January 2007, noting that forest peoples had been completely ignored in Kinshasa's submission. In its concluding observations issued in August 2007, ICERD recommended that DRC take 'urgent and adequate measures' to protect the rights of the Batwa to land'. It also urged that there be a moratorium on forest lands, register the ancestral lands of the Batwa, and make provision for the forest rights of indigenous peoples in domestic legislation.

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