

IMPROVING SADC RESPONSES TO BRING PEACE TO THE DRC

ADITI LALBAHADUR¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) continues to skirt crisis, as the elections first postponed in 2016 to December 2017 appear once again to be postponed indefinitely. Amid opposition accusations that he is clinging to power, President Joseph Kabila continues to insist that the necessary conditions to hold free and fair elections are not being met. These claims are supported by the DRC's independent electoral authority, the Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante (CENI). Meanwhile, concerns about the government's involvement in mass killings along its border with Angola in the Kasai region have resulted in calls for intervention by the international community. Yet despite the furore, SADC has, at best, maintained a peripheral interest in the DRC. This policy briefing unpacks the relevance of events in the DRC for the SADC region, and encourages the regional body to become more involved to mitigate the fallout.

INTRODUCTION

Solving the problems of the DRC is not a simple matter, as the ambiguous results of various interventions in the past decades have demonstrated. Even the most intensive and successful peace process – spearheaded by South Africa in the early 2000s and leading to the signing of the Sun City Agreement in

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 SADC should join the international community in condemning the involvement of government forces in perpetuating the humanitarian crisis unfolding in the DRC.
- 2 SADC should pressure Kabila to work closely with opposition parties to resolve the looming electoral crisis and hold elections as soon as possible.
- 3 SADC should insist on the cessation of all hostilities in the region and assist the DRC in facilitating a way forward in a manner that brings all parties to the table (reminiscent of the Sun City Accord of the early 2000s).
- 4 These actions need to be inspired by a broader commitment by the regional body to ensure members protect the human rights, dignity and security of all citizens of the region.

2003 – established only a relative peace, as swathes of the eastern part of the country remained mired in conflict.² Today the growing instability in the DRC is the result of continued delays in the holding of national elections. These were originally scheduled for 2016. On 16 October CENI announced that elections were once again delayed until 2019, thereby aggravating tensions in more parts of the country.³

SADC has chosen not to join the growing chorus of calls for President Joseph Kabila to hold elections by December 2017, which would result in his stepping down. This leaves the issue largely in the purview of the UN, the AU and the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). Kabila's continued grip on power – and the ensuing escalation in violence – is rapidly becoming the biggest problem in the DRC.

Rising political instability in the wake of the electoral crisis has resulted in the spread of violence, alongside calls for Kabila to step down.⁴ Compounding the political violence is the deepening humanitarian crisis in the Kasai region, bordering Angola. Mass graves have been discovered there, and government forces have been implicated in perpetrating mass killings alongside local Mayi-Mayi militia.

These escalating tensions feed fears that the conflict in the DRC will worsen, demolishing the hard-won gains made during the 16 years since the signing of the peace accord. They also necessitate a stronger stance from SADC. This policy briefing examines the implications of greater instability in the DRC for the region and argues that the regional body should take stronger action by pressuring Kabila to unequivocally commit to holding elections and take responsibility for his forces' brutality against civilians.

DETERIORATING PEACE IN THE DRC

Security has been declining steadily in the DRC since the run-up to the delayed 2016 elections when it became evident that Kabila was unwilling to honour the agreed timeline. Concerns about ill intentions first surfaced in January 2016 when the electoral body, CENI, announced that irregularities with the voters' roll necessitated pushing back elections to July 2018.⁵ This led to violent protests across the country and scores of civilian deaths as government forces quashed dissent with brute force.⁶

Several analysts believe that conditions are, in fact, sufficient to hold elections in December, while the

government insists that the integrity of the elections cannot be undermined by an inaccurate voters' roll.

Temporarily assuaged by an agreement reached on 31 December 2016 to hold elections during 2017, opposition parties are once again calling out the government for obstructionism. In February 2017 the opposition was dealt a serious blow with the untimely death of its leader, Étienne Tshisekedi. The veteran politician, who was considered Kabila's strongest opponent, had managed to galvanise the major opposition groups to join forces under a single arrangement known as the Rassemblement. Tshisekedi's death has caused this opposition alliance to unravel.⁷ In a country with close to 500 political parties,⁸ unity and coordination are necessary preconditions for effective opposition, and their failure to come to terms has further exacerbated tensions.

The growing humanitarian crisis in Kasai has interrupted government attempts to update the voters' roll. In August 2017 the UN High Commissioner for Refugees said that more than 250 people, including 62 children, been killed between mid-March and mid-June. Government forces are believed to be complicit in these unlawful acts, with various reports of soldiers digging mass graves.⁹ Over and above the Kasai crisis and growing urban protests against Kabila, the instability in the eastern parts of the country continues unabated, taking on dimensions of ethnic warfare.

The pace and breadth of the spreading violence have ignited concerns that the country is on the brink of yet another war. The DRC's fragile peace has been hard won. The two Congolese wars that preceded the 2002 Sun City Agreement¹⁰ (November 1996 – May 1997; August 1998 – July 2003) resulted in the death of over 5 million people and the displacement of many more. Another war would have a detrimental impact on peace and stability in the region, and it is imperative that SADC acts to prevent the violence from escalating further.

GROWING HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS

Events in the DRC are historically inextricably linked with those in neighbouring countries. The involvement of Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda in the previous Congo wars was a consequence of shared histories and populations, porous borders and access to minerals. Continuous fighting in the eastern parts of the DRC has been linked to Rwandan and Ugandan government support for insurgents, in particular the infamous M23 rebel movement and the

Allied Democratic Forces.¹¹ A reversion to full-scale war could worsen cross-border, ethno-linguistic animosities, igniting conflict across the region.

Such a war would directly affect SADC members South Africa and Tanzania, both of which have contributed troops to the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC, tasked with helping to stabilise the eastern parts of the country. A full-scale war would likely require more intensive engagement from these countries – albeit under the auspices of the UN.

Even without a war, further election delays could inspire greater violence. This has implications for the broader region, spreading from the Great Lakes to the rest of Southern Africa, as increased violence could worsen the refugee crisis in neighbouring countries.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (see Figure 1), 1.5 million Congolese were displaced from August 2016 to May 2017 – far more than in Iraq or Syria.¹² The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that new occurrences of displacement raised the total to 3.8 million displaced persons at the end of June 2017 – an increase of more than 2 million in 12 months.¹³ The human impact of

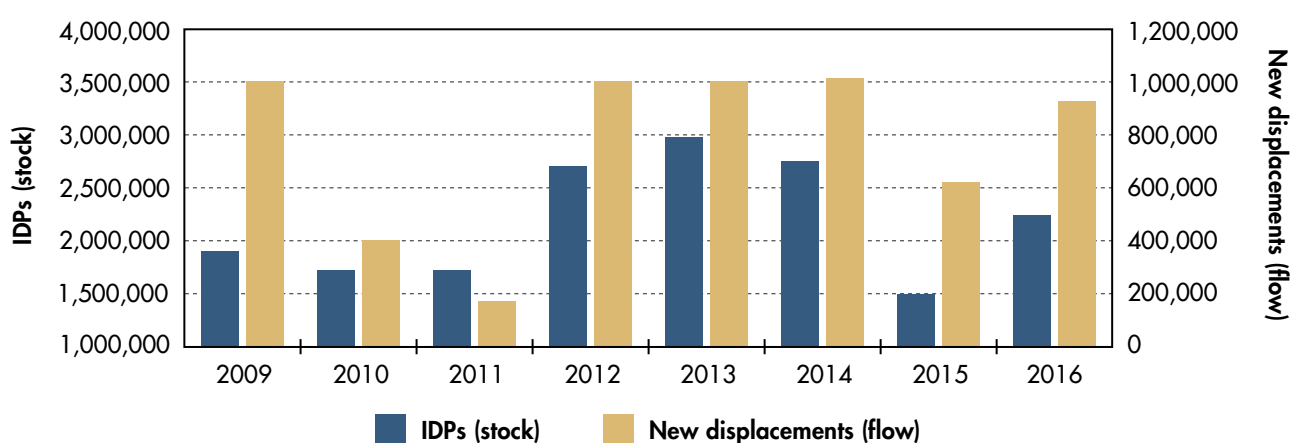
insecurity in the DRC is unsurpassed by any other conflict on the continent. Further instability is likely to ratchet up the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees.

According to authorities, roughly 1.4 million IDPs are a direct consequence of the violence in Kasai, which affects eight out of 26 provinces in the country.¹⁴ Adding to the humanitarian concerns are the thousands of refugees streaming into Angola (32 000 according to Medecins Sans Frontiers),¹⁵ which now needs an additional \$65 million in assistance from the international community. South Africa has also been a popular destination for Congolese refugees since the early 2000s.

SADC'S LACKLUSTRE RESPONSES

At the 37th Ordinary Summit of SADC Heads of State and Government held in Pretoria in August 2017, the regional body took a lacklustre stance on developments in the DRC. In addition to 'commending' all parties for the 'progress' made in the implementation of the 31 December 2016 agreement, the summit decried targeted sanctions by 'non-African organisations and countries in conflict with the principles of sovereignty of States and of non-interference; and call[ed] upon these organisations

FIGURE 1 NUMBER OF PEOPLE DISPLACED BY CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE



Note: The number of people migrating within a specific timeframe is known as the 'migrant flow'. The term 'stock' refers to the total number of persons born in a country other than that in which they reside. It is also known as a country's 'foreign-born population' (as defined by the AAG Center for Global Geography Education)

Source: IDMC (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre), 'Democratic Republic of the Congo', <http://internal-displacement.org/countries/drc>, accessed 15 September 2017

to withdraw the sanctions and to avoid taking such measures in the future by promoting dialogue and mutual respect'.¹⁶

The SADC Organ Troika Ministerial Assessment Follow-Up Mission condemned 'the escalation of violence and insecurity in the Kasai Provinces perpetrated by the Kamwina Nsapu militia group' and 'urged all stakeholders to refrain from actions that would undermine the political and security stability'.¹⁷

These statements show that the regional body prioritises regime (and therefore state) security over human security concerns. The troika statement is especially concerning given that the UN has accused government forces of perpetrating much of the violence in Kasai after assessing evidence of soldiers digging mass graves.¹⁸

In the case of the DRC, SADC's political will appears to be limited to supporting Kabila, although the region's leaders have shown a preference for broaching touchy issues privately. For instance, Angola's former president, José Eduardo dos Santos, is rumoured to have played a key role in coaxing Kabila to schedule elections, in the name of maintaining regional peace. However, in August 2017 Angola inaugurated a new president, João Lourenço, who is largely an unknown entity. Concerns about Dos Santos's health also cast doubt on his ability to remain involved in the DRC.

Another reason for SADC's low profile on this issue is that the DRC falls principally under the purview of the ICGLR, with Angola at its helm and South Africa as an observer country. The ICGLR has met SADC security ministers over the years to discuss developments in the DRC. However, progress is slow, owing to difficulties in translating decisions into action.¹⁹ The August 2017 SADC summit decision to appoint a special envoy to the DRC was a positive step, reflecting the region's growing concerns. Two months later the name of the envoy is yet to be announced.²⁰

CONCLUSION

The deteriorating situation in the DRC necessitates a stronger response from SADC. The growing humanitarian crisis risks destabilising the Great Lakes and Southern African regions, as the increasing instability could re-ignite deep-seated ethno-linguistic divisions if it remains unaddressed.

SADC's adherence to the principle of 'non-interference' manifests as an alignment with the incumbent Kabila regime. While Kabila is not the only problem in the DRC, his continued presence jeopardises the country's fragile peace. SADC must take steps to stop the humanitarian crisis from growing, and pressure Kabila into holding elections within a timeframe that is agreed to by all parties in the DRC. It can best do this by reviving its role as a peace facilitator, perhaps under the leadership of Mbeki, who led a similar process in the 2000s.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Aditi Lalbahadur is the Programme Manager of the Foreign Policy Programme at SAIIA. She follows international politics in Southern Africa.
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