Crisis
IN THE
Congo

THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO
COMPREHENSIVE REPORT
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Executive Summary

International Christian Concern (ICC) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that focuses on the persecution of Christians in foreign countries. Recognizing that persecution is a multifaceted problem that requires a comprehensive solution, ICC has developed a unique approach focused on assistance, advocacy, and awareness. ICC exists to bandage the wounds of persecuted Christians and to build the Church in the most challenging parts of the world.

One of the most challenging parts of the world currently is sub-Saharan Africa, more specifically the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). With extreme dangers in the northeast portion of the country, general economic devastation, and unstable government for the majority of its history, the DRC remains a dangerous country for both Christians and non-Christians.

This report aims to provide a succinct yet robust historical background with information relevant to the topic at hand, a record of the current situation in the country, three case studies of Christians in the DRC, and policy recommendations from an advocacy standpoint. ICC believes that through a further awareness of the situation at hand, alongside educated recommendations for additional steps to take, the DRC can become a safer place to live and thrive.

Throughout this report, readers will find that Christianity has been present and growing throughout the country’s history and that a majority of the country’s population identifies as some form of Christian. Beginning with Portuguese colonists in the 1400s, Christianity has been the religion of many rulers in the DRC, leading to the further spread of citizens identifying with the faith.

Like many other countries in the sub-Saharan region however, the DRC is plagued by Islamic State Extremists who commit extreme acts of violence against innocent people on a regular basis. This report explains the origins of the most prevalent extremist group, their logistics, case studies regarding the type of violence they commit, as well as policy recommendations for how to address the terror they cause in the country.

Stories such as that of Aaron and Deborah, the violence of schools and towns along the border of the DRC and Uganda, and the story of Sarah provide an up close and personal examination into the violence Christians face on a daily basis in the DRC. Aaron, Deborah, and Sarah have each asked to use pseudonyms for they safety which is indicated by an asterisk (*) the first time their name is mentioned. Their stories are gathered through interviews conducted by ICC staff member, Kate, who is also using a pseudonym.

While this report aims to provide enough information for education and understanding, ICC understands the limitation of cultural understanding as the author of this report is not from the DRC. However, ample research has been conducted, and this report has been crafted with extreme care and consideration for those involved in or related to any conflicts mentioned within.

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History of the Congo

Beginning with some of the earliest documentation of the country in the 1300s, the territory that is now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo was home to a variety of peoples and kingdoms, including the Kongo. In the early 1480s, the Congo king was officially deposed by forces surrounding internal rivalry and slavery. In 1526, the leader of the Congo River, King Leopold of Belgium’s rule of the DRC directly, removing King Leopold from power. While this change helped the overall death toll, there was minimal change in the treatment of laborers including the Congolese. In 1942, the compulsory labor requirements were increased to 120 days a year per citizen. A change finally occurred in 1958 when a minimum wage and workers’ rights were established. After centuries of occupation, the DRC gained independence in June of 1960 with the first election resulting in a man named Patrice Lumumba as president.

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In 1962, the Congo declared independence from Belgium. King Leopold was amongst those who followed the Kuba federation. While democratically elected, many international actors did not approve of the election in late 2023 but thus far there is conciliatory, and attentive to others.4 The country is slated for a general election in late 2023 but thus far there is no established date and no great internal push for one due to increased violence in the northeastern portion of the state. The current rebel group active in the region is known as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) who are involved with the Hutus and Tutsis. The current rebel group active in the region is known as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) who are involved with the Hutus and Tutsis.

In response, Rwandan and Ugandan armies invaded the DRC less than a week later. Several years of fighting ensued between the DRC, backed by Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Angola, and Rwanda and Uganda. One hundred and sixty thousand Rwandan and Ugandan soldiers died. In 1994, 180,000 Hutu refugees from Rwanda entered the DRC, many of whom were former fighters of the Rwandan Armed Forces. Hutus—the ethnic group responsible for the death of approximately 800,000 Tutsis—took refuge in the DRC. This flood of refugees created a serious humanitarian crisis for the country, and a secessionist movement establishing the DRC’s zero tolerance policy for sexual assault crimes. Lasting success, however, came in the form of involvement with the UN and many countries coming to the aid of the DRC, leading to a definitive outing of a majority of the rebels who had caused severe damage. After ruling for 13 years, Kabila was involved in the first ever peaceful transition of power in 2019. The government made multiple positive steps including a nation-wide movement establishing the DRC’s zero tolerance policy for sexual assault crimes. Lasting success, however, came in the form of involvement with the UN and many countries coming to the aid of the DRC, leading to a definitive outing of a majority of the rebels who had caused severe damage. After ruling for 13 years, Kabila was involved in the first ever peaceful transition of power in 2019. The government made multiple positive steps including a nation-wide movement establishing the DRC’s zero tolerance policy for sexual assault crimes. Lasting success, however, came in the form of involvement with the UN and many countries coming to the aid of the DRC, leading to a definitive outing of a majority of the rebels who had caused severe damage. After ruling for 13 years, Kabila was involved in the first ever peaceful transition of power in 2019. The government made multiple positive steps including a nation-wide movement establishing the DRC’s zero tolerance policy for sexual assault crimes. Lasting success, however, came in the form of involvement with the UN and many countries coming to the aid of the DRC, leading to a definitive outing of a majority of the rebels who had caused severe damage. After ruling for 13 years, Kabila was involved in the first ever peaceful transition of power in 2019. The government made multiple positive steps including a nation-wide movement establishing the DRC’s zero tolerance policy for sexual assault crimes. Lasting success, however, came in the form of involvement with the UN and many countries coming to the aid of the DRC, leading to a definitive outing of a majority of the rebels who had caused severe damage.
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The Current Situation

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), located in the southern portion of Africa, remains one of the most naturally rich countries in the world. With resources like rubber, hydroelectric power, mineral resources, the world's second largest rain forest, and immense biodiversity, the country has been a highly sought-after piece of land for centuries.

According to the World Bank, the DRC ranks 164 out of 174 countries on the 2020 Human Capital Index. This index is comprised of many different variables with the aim of allowing countries to compare their economic and physical health status to that of what it could be if it reached its full potential. On a scale from 0 to 1, the DRC scored 0.37 in 2020 indicating a Congolese child born today can expect to achieve only 37% of their potential, compared to what would have been possible if they had benefited from a quality schooling experience and optimal health conditions.

Despite a diverse wealth of resources and a large population, the DRC has been unable to thrive in centuries due to multiple factors including devastation from colonization, violent political uprisings, hundreds of active militant groups, and instability within the government. According to Transparency International, a group focused on recording and determining the level of corruption in a country, the DRC is ranked 160 out of 180 for the most corrupt countries, with a score of 20 on a scale of 0-100, with 0 being the most corrupt.

The scale utilized by Transparency International measures factors such as public opinion, whether government workers receive bribes, freedom of movement within the country, among many others. Transparency International discusses in one of their recent reports how the instability in the national defense forces has contributed to corruption across the nation. A lack of awareness or reluctance to act allows for mineral and wildlife trafficking which poses a risk to human security and can easily lead to the plundering of resources.

The current government led by Felix Tshisekedi, who has served as president since 2019, despite being the first peaceful transition of power the government has seen, still faces corruption. Although his presidential term is scheduled to end in the latter half of 2023, there is no election date and no large push for one. Rather, the people of the DRC are pushing for action against the ADF and other militant groups throughout the country. In terms of religious freedom in regard to the government, the official constitution states that the country is secular. It prohibits religious discrimination, provides for freedom of religion or belief, bans the use of religion for political ends, and stipulates that impositions on freedom of conscience stemming from “religious fanaticism” shall be punishable by law.

According to the United States 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom, US embassy officials discussed issues of religious freedom, interfait cooperation, and equal participation in society by all citizens, regardless of religious background, with the Ministries of Interior, Justice, and Human Rights and International Cooperation, as well as with the government’s Bureau of Cooperation with Nongovernmental Organizations and Public Administration. This agreement to have discussions indicates the DRC’s government’s cooperation and potential interest in upholding international religious freedom in a more complete manner in the future.

The main issue the government faces at this time is regaining militant and armed extremist groups active in the country. The main violent actor is currently the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). The ADF is an Islamist extremist group which originated primarily in Uganda and extended, primarily to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in the early 1990s. In 2018, the ADF officially allied itself with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in order to achieve more widespread recognition as an international Islamic extremist organization. Before this allying, the ADF tried to make different relations with other Islamist extremist groups using ISIS-like flags when committing acts of violence and using language and tactics commonly used by other extremist groups.

While analysts often dismiss the severity of the relationship between the ADF and ISIS, many observers within the territory see signs within ADF camps of increased religiosity including celebrations of Eid al-Adha, the use of Sharia law, and an Islamic banking system which fighters are compelled to use. Regardless of the strength of their relationship, one thing is clear: Islamic State’s influence on ADF marks a shift for the worse for the region’s Christians. Since the ADF’s allegiance to ISIS, the ferocity of religious based attacks has skyrocketed.

Despite the organization’s affiliation with ISIS and deaths of hundreds of people per year, the group is yet to be designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) or an Entity of Particular Concern (EPC) by the state department. The US State Department has designated the ADF on the Terrorist Exclusion List (TEL) which raises global awareness of the US’s concern, limits travel of groups’ participants into the country, and further isolates the terrorist organization, but including a designation such as EPC would provide official recognition for the undeniable religious aspect of ADF.

According to the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016 (Wolf Act), the President must designate any non-state actor who commits the egregious acts outlined in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 an EPC. This designation requires the US government to name any officials who are involved with the EPC and creates strong pressure to take further action. While giving such a designation would not require any immediate action on the part of the US, the designation alone provides international acknowledgment of the religious aspect of these ongoing conflicts.

Sources for ADF Material:

MOST RECENT STATISTICS

Population: 99,010,212
Life Expectancy: 59
Human Capital Index (scale 0-4): 0.4
GDP Per Capita: $586.5
Poverty Percentage: 69.7%
Official Language: French
Religious Breakup:
- Christian: 88%
- Catholic: 55%
- Protestant: 33%
- Muslim: 2%
- Atheist or Non-Affiliated: 2%

90% of DRC’s population is Muslim or Christian with 90% of DRC’s population living in the territories of the DRC’s two main ethnic groups, the Pygmies and Bantu.

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Sources for ADF Material:
AARON AND DEBORAH

In a remote section of the DRC, ICC staff member, Kate*, sits with 18-year-old Aaron* to discuss his experience with the ADF. Kate and Aaron are surrounded by pastors, runaways, refugees, and children who have all gathered to share their experience with the rebel group. Aaron’s younger sister Deborah* also sits nearby, watching with wide eyes as her brother tells the story of their kidnapping.

Aaron and his sister were taken from their home by armed men from the ADF. Aaron tells Kate through a translator how ADF rebels from Uganda, the DRC, and Rwanda had kidnapped him and his sister from his home in Uganda, pillaging his village saying “Allahu Akbar”. “We praise Allah”, and speaking in Arabic.

Thirteen people were kidnapped alongside Aaron and his sister, and they were all taken by the ADF to the hills where they stayed for 3 days. As they walked, the men talked of their final destination; the ADF base camp. Aaron was told that upon their arrival they would all be forced to make a choice. They could either convert to Islam and immediately become soldiers of the ADF or they could choose to keep their faith and be killed. Aaron was told that at the camp, the entire cause would be explained, and he would know their reason for fighting.

Luckily, before Aaron had to make that decision, a group of Christians came to fight the ADF members imprisoning him, and he and Deborah were able to escape. They were found by members of the Universal Peace Federation (UPF) and brought to an orphanage that provides refuge, where Kate was about to interview them. ICC was able to help Aaron and his sister by providing goods after this tragedy. In response to this aid, Aaron wrote to ICC saying, “Today we have received a lot of things that we have never seen before in our entire lives. We have food, clothes, beds, bedding, and money for daily use. On top of that, we have money for our uncle to help us open a business where we shall be getting money to sustain us. What kind of love is this? We do not know how to repay you. We can only pray that the Almighty God favors you and adds you more years to continue helping other orphans in the Congo whose parents have been killed by the ADF Muslim enemies.”

ICC prays alongside Aaron and his sister that the work we have provided will be able to continue to help support the many people in the DRC who face violent persecution each day.

The ADF conducted an attack on Sunday, June 11, 2023, in Kasindi, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), leaving eight dead, 12 injured and many others missing. Christians in Kasindi called an ICC staffer asking for prayers around 10 p.m., as the terror group invaded the town. “Please know that the ADF has invaded the Western side of the town of Kasindi and Christians are being killed as we speak,” said a villager. “People have been alerted and they are fleeing the area. The attackers are using machetes and mines to avoid being heard if they use guns. We are asking for your prayers since this attack can turn out to be a mass massacre of believers if it is not stopped.” Security forces battled the rebels throughout the night in this border town between Uganda and the war-torn DRC.

“The number of those killed stands at eight, and several others are in critical condition following last night’s attack,” a source confirmed from the mortar. “There are missing people that we suspect have been abducted by the rebels. Hundreds have also fled and crossed into Uganda as other families return to look for their loved ones. Several houses were also burnt down. The security officers took a long time to repulse the ensuing terrorists and before they could arrive at the area, many people had already been killed, and houses were on fire. One church leader has expressed his concerns about the security situation in Kasindi, a town known to host millions of Congolese displaced people. “We are only able to call relatives about these matters. We know the only place where millions of displaced people flee to shelter has become a target by the ADF rebels,” said the church leader. “Kasindi used to be a home for all the displaced Christians in Nord Kivu, and also others from as far as Ituri. The enemy is now coming for us. Where shall we run to? We are asking the government to protect us from these killers that have continued to target Christians for over three decades. And above all, we ask that you keep us in prayer as the Congolese believers bear this brunt of this fresh attack.”

Just 5 days after this attack on June 16th, the ADF killed at least 45 students in an attack in Mpundwe, Kasese District, Uganda. The town is home after work when I saw a group of about 30 people dressed in jungle uniform but with their heads covered and armed to the teeth. I thought they were our border patrol soldiers doing their usual security checks, but back in my mind, I was wondering why they had covered their faces. Little did I know they were the ADFs from Congo.

Case Studies

SARAH

The person sitting in the chair across from Kate changes and now Sarah sits, waiting to share her story. Sarah is a middle-aged woman who speaks quietly and with brevity. As she talks to Kate, it is easy to see why she seems worn down.

“In summary, my husband and I left our house to look for my house and everything that I had,” is the first thing she says. “All things were burned; we are here by God’s grace.”

Sarah is from the Kanuma area of the DRC where the area is surrounded by her family raised goats and chickens on a farm to provide for themselves. In April of 2022, the ADF raided her village, leaving devastation in their wake.

“When they killed my children, they spoke in Arabic. They said ‘Allahu Akbar,’ and they mentioned the word ‘God’ and his sister. Sarah tells Kate that they are living in the school and don’t have any way of eating or getting money to eat. As the students had met, they were promised to assist us to settle down, but you are the only one who has come through. The government has millions of Christian refugees living in camps and it is difficult to receive any help in terms of food, medicines and other important needs. We count it a blessing that among the many that needed help, we were selected to benefit. We now have a house, food, furniture, clothing, and money to start something small to make more money.”

ICC prays that Sarah and her family will continue to be blessed and that other people who have faced extreme loss at the hands of the ADF may see that there is hope in the work of the Lord.

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Advocacy Recommendations

Because of the severity of the situation between the DRC government, the ADF, and those who reside within the country, ICC believes political actions and pressure from foreign governments could work to help improve the situation for those living in the DRC. ICC recognizes that some of these actions require complex government involvement, create political discourse, or take a long time to implement. ICC also believes that these actions, while costly, outweigh the violence, corruption, and deaths that many people in the DRC face every day.

ICC recommends that the United States consider the following actions:

• Encourage the US Department of State to designate the ADF as an Entity of Particular Concern in their 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom.

  The designation of Entity of Particular Concern allows the United States to take further action against particular leaders in the designated group as well as provides global recognition for the religious element of the conflict.

• Promote continuation of US sanctions on leaders of the ADF and pursue other means of international accountability for these individuals.

  According to the UN report from the DRC Group of Experts in 2022, the internal composition of the leaders of the DRC has shown signs of instability. If leaders of the ADF are properly monitored and held accountable for their actions through actions such as sanctions, it may lead to a further collapse of the rebel group as a whole.

• Enforce a high standard of training within the regional security forces in areas surrounding the ADF, potentially consulting Ugandan and Rwandan officials who have proven successful in ridding rebels from hosting a territory on their land.

• Reports have shown that the regional security forces in the DRC are severely lacking in the northeastern portion of the state where the ADF is most active. If accountability and structure can be implemented in this portion of the DRC’s forces, a more organized front against the ADF may prove effective. Additionally, both Ugandan and Rwandan forces have proven mostly successful in ridding the ADF from within their borders. If the DRC is able to benefit from the knowledge these countries have in how to most effectively oust the rebel group, they may find success.

• One element of concern with the collaboration between the DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda however is the ongoing conflict with the M23 rebel group. The M23, another rebel group active within the DRC, is thought to be a group backed by Rwandan forces and has been documented as wreaking havoc throughout the country. As a result, Ugandan forces have come to the aid of the DRC sending troops as recently as April 2023. The tension between the DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda may prove difficult in forming an alliance united against the ADF when the M23 has clearly taken priority.

• Motivate both the people and the government to stay on track with their election cycle, effectively promoting stability and the opportunity for consistent and stable governance. Additionally, aid in security within the election cycle recognizing the many instances of severe violence in the past.

• Stability within a government has proven to provide consistency and growth in the development of a country. If the DRC is able to stay on track with the election cycle as scheduled, they may be able to further prove to the global community that they are a valuable asset and an ally worthy of expending forces.