



Crisis IN THE Congo

THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO COMPREHENSIVE REPORT

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary 3

History of the Congo 4

The Current Situation 7

Case Studies 10

 Aaron and Deborah..... 10

 The ADF on the Border 11

 Sarah 12

Advocacy Recommendations 13

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 their 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.

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 as well as parts the Congo and Angola was ruled by the Kongo empire which was characterized as a highly structured and developed state which lasted for approximately 500 years.¹

Following the global trend of exploration and territorial conquests, the DRC first made relations with Europe through Portuguese explorers on the Congo River in the early 1480s. The Portuguese brought with them information about Catholicism and the Bible which led the king at the time of the interaction, King Nzinga a Nkuwu, to convert to Christianity eight years after the initial interaction.² The following king, Afonso, held the Christian tradition of his father, cementing the practice of Christianity as an option in the DRC for the foreseeable future.

Much of the religious tradition is thought to be a combination of Christian practices and traditional religions. Contrary to much of the European evangelism at the time, the introduction of Christianity into the DRC did not correspond to immediate conversions.

The trend of European colonization continued as the Atlantic slave trade impacted the Kongo in the 1500s with more than 5 million slaves captured; most were sent to Brazil over the course of 300 years. In 1526, the leader of the Kongo, King Afonso, is documented imploring the then king of Portugal to stop the barbaric practice, saying the DRC was facing “depopulation.” In the mid-to-late 1500s, the Kuba federation was formed in modern day southern Congo which created further divisions in the country. For hundreds of years the country was divided into those who followed the Kongo empire and those who followed the Kuba federation. Longtime rivalry and conflict led to

diversity and a greater range of thought. In the early 1800s, the Kongo kingdom was officially desecrated by issues surrounding internal rivalry and slavery.

In 1884, the Berlin Conference,³ a conference intended to decide the logistics regarding European control throughout most of Africa, resulted in King Leopold of Belgium’s rule of the DRC. Most Europeans at the time had to use the Congo River as the access point for exploration of the continent. King Leopold was amongst those who utilized the Congo River, but he also had sent researchers further into the continent to explore what land would be most profitable for exploitation. Leopold publicly announced his intentions as being related to humanitarian aid, however his true intentions were revealed when over 10 million Congolese were killed or worked to death in an effort to extract rubber.

Due to the extreme maltreatment of the Congolese people, the Belgian government was forced to take over control 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 government requiring all Congolese to complete 60 days of compulsory labor each year.

Throughout the 1900s, many revolts against the brutal labor conditions were continually met with harsh repression. In 1942, the compulsory labor requirements were increased to 120 days a year per citizen. A change finally occurred in 1948 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. While democratically elected, many international actors did not approve of Lumumba and decided to get involved in the country’s politics. Belgians

attempted to retain control in the country, and a secessionist movement began in the eastern province of Katanga. President Lumumba asked for aid from the UN who authorized a peacekeeping mission in return. Just 4 months after his election, President Lumumba was removed from power, arrested in a coup d’état, and replaced by Joseph-Desire Mobutu with backing from Belgium and the United States.

After a complicated coup d’état with several executions of public officials and discussions of violent and disturbing CIA assassinations including that of Lumumba himself, Mobutu became the official president in 1965 and remained president for 32 years. During the Cold War, Mobutu announced the DRC’s support of the United States and was supported unequivocally in return. Following the Cold War, the United States began to regulate the DRC’s government, requiring further democratic establishments including a multi-party system.

When the Rwandan Genocide occurred in 1994, over one million Hutu--the ethnic group responsible for the death of approximately 800,000 Tutsi--took refuge in the DRC. This flood of Hutu, including many people who orchestrated the genocide, erupted in the form of several armed militant groups, including one led by Laurent Kabila. Most of these militant groups were centered in the northeastern portion of the country along the border of Rwanda.

As Mobutu attempted to control such militant groups, he was pushed out of power and Kabila, backed by the Rwandan militants, took power as president. As Kabila established his control, he demanded those from the Rwandan army who had backed his succession to power to leave the country. He cracked down on Tutsi members from his government and attempted to sever ties with Rwanda

as a whole. 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 Uganda and Rwanda, backed by several militia groups. Laurent Kabila was assassinated in 2001 and power transitioned to his son Joseph Kabila who continued leading, as the death toll rose to 3.3 million, and Ugandan troops officially withdrew in May 2003 as the last foreign troops in the DRC.

Despite foreign powers leaving, the fighting continued with the rebel groups in the Ituri region in the northeast for several more months, resulting in a 3.9-million-person death toll over the course of the conflict. The majority of the conflict ended in 2006 with the surrender of rebel group “Mai Mai” leader, Gedeon Kyungu Mutanda.

In July of 2006, the first round of the first multiparty elections for both presidential and parliamentary positions in 40 years occurred with a 70 percent voter turnout. After a tension- and violence-filled race, Joseph Kabila maintains power as president winning in a run-off vote against Bembe. Despite the severe threats he received after his loss, Bembe was elected to a high-ranking senatorial position which created widespread conflict within the government.

Through many years of violence, continued disruption plagued the country while the divided government

attempted to crack down on rebel groups. 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 ousting 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 with the presidency shifting to Felix Tshisekedi, the current president of the DRC. Tshisekedi’s father Etienne served as prime minister for three terms in the 1990s, but Felix Tshisekedi’s win was unexpected. At the time of the election, he had no experience in high office or even in a managerial position. Despite this apparent lack of qualification however, Tshisekedi has been cited as being more diplomatic, 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 the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) who are believed to have ties to the original rebel groups involved with the Hutus from Rwanda.



Figure 1 Image of King Nzinga a Nkuwu of the Kongo Empire.

¹Sources for Timeline and History:

HumanRightsWatch.org. “DR Congo: Chronology.” Last modified August 21, 2009. https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/08/21/dr-congo-chronology#_Early_History

²Sources for Religious History:

SouthAfricanHistoryOnline.org. “Kingdom of Kongo 1390-1914.” Last modified May 19, 2023. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/kingdom-kongo-1390-1914>

³Sources for Berlin Conference and Belgium:

Studysmart.co.uk. “Berlin Conference.” <https://www.studysmarter.co.uk/explanations/human-geography/political-geography/berlin-conference/>

⁴Tshisekedi Information Sources:

Mules, Ineke. “Who is Felix Tshisekedi, DR Congo’s New President?” Last modified January, 24, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/who-is-felix-tshisekedi-dr-congos-new-president/a-47025072>

The Current Situation

The DRC, located in the southern portion of Africa, remains one of the most naturally rich countries in the world. With resources like rubber, hydro-electric 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.⁶

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 utilizes factors such as public opinion, whether government workers receive bribes, freedom of movement within a 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, interfaith 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 Bureaus 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 regulating militias and armed extremist groups active in the country. The main violent actor is currently the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).⁷ The ADF is an Islamist extremist group which originated primarily in Uganda and Rwanda. 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 allyship, 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.

MOST RECENT STATISTICS

Population: 99,010,212

Life Expectancy: 59

Human Capital Index (scale 0-4): 0.4

GDP Per Capita: \$586.5

Poverty Percentage⁵: 69.7%

Official Language: French

Religious Breakup:

- Christian: 88%
- Catholic: 55%
- Protestant: 33%
- Muslim: 2%
- Atheist or Non-Affiliated: 2%



⁵ Percent of total population living off of less than \$2.15 per day

⁶ Statistics Sources: WorldBank.org. “The World Bank in the DRC.” Last modified March 29, 2023.
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/drc/overview#:~:text=DRC%20is%20endowed%20with%20exceptional,the%20world's%20 second%20largest%20 rainforest.>

⁷Sources for ADF Material:

Congo Research Group. “Inside the ADF Rebellion.” Last modified November, 2018.

<https://www.congoresearchgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Inside-the-ADF-Rebellion-14Nov18.pdf>

USCIRF.gov. “Religious Freedom in Central Africa.” Last modified February, 2023.

<https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023%20Factsheet%20%20Religious%20Freedom%20Concerns%20in%20Central%20 Africa.pdf>

Case Studies

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,



Figure 3 Photo of Aaron as he is interviewed by Kate.

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.



Figure 2 Photo of Deborah After she Received Aid.

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, the ADF burned 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 she and 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 'jihad'.

Sarah, her husband, and their five remaining children grabbed anything they could on their way out and made their way to the orphanage where she sits as she talks with Kate. Sarah tells Kate that they are living in the school and don't have any way to provide for.

ICC was able to help Sarah by providing her family with basic needs such as a bed and food and get her set up with money

to start a small business to sustain her family. In response to this aid Sarah rejoiced saying, "First we thank God for keeping us alive after surviving the 2022 attack that claimed our family members. We have not been able to live as before since we got displaced but we have seen the hand of the Lord. We have got

"Secondly, we thank you for doing us such a great favor when we needed help to stabilize our livelihood. Many had 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.

THE ADF ON THE BORDER

The ADF conducted an attack 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 hammers and machetes 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 officers 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 mortuary. "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 deteriorating security situation in Kasindi, a town known to host millions of Congolese displaced people. "We are pained that the only safe place where millions of victims flee to for 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 Mpondwe, Kasese District, Uganda. The town is two kilometers away from the Democratic Republic of the Congo's border. "I was alerted of the attack a few minutes after 11 p.m. as screams of the students were heard from our school," said Llubhira Secondary School's head teacher. "I contacted security immediately, but they never showed up until after an hour when the attack had ended, and

the rebels were on their way out. At the moment, we have counted 45 dead students. The majority of them were killed inside the student residence that was bombed while the others were found dead at the classes doing preps."

The headteacher also added that the attackers abducted an unknown number of students. As of June 20th, 25 bodies were recovered, and eight victims were in critical condition. "We offer our deepest condolences to the families of those who have been killed and offer our prayers and thoughts to those who have been wounded," said Fred Enanga, the Uganda Police Force Spokesperson. He added that the rebels set a dormitory on fire and looted a food store.

Local sources confirmed that three members of the community were also killed as the rebels went back, looting homes and killing people. A local motorcycle rider confirmed spotting the ADF militants heavily armed near the school just before the attack, saying, "I was riding 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."



Figure 5 Photo of Sarah

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 20228, 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.

CONTACT: This report is published by International Christian Concern's Advocacy department. If you would like to get in touch with ICC's Advocacy department, please contact advocacy@persecution.org. All other inquiries, please contact icc@persecution.org.

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