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The Devastating Crisis in Eastern Congo

Excerpts of Remarks by Chairman Chris Smith (NJ-04)
House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights
December 11, 2012
2172 Rayburn House Office Building

Good afternoon. Today's hearing will examine U.S. policy regarding the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This conflict was exacerbated by Rwanda's interventions in neighboring eastern Congo, as documented by the release of three United Nations reports this year. These reports confirmed Rwanda's support of militia who have ravaged and continue to plague this region. The State Department was unavailable to testify at our September 19th hearing on this issue, and the subcommittee promised at that time to follow-up when State was available to testify.

In the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, successive U.S. administrations have turned a blind eye to reports of Rwandan plundering of resources from the DRC and support for rebels who have devastated eastern Congo and its people. It seems that guilt over the Clinton Administration's failure responding effectively to the genocide in Rwanda has led subsequent U.S. administrations to be reluctant to criticize the Government of Rwanda.

With these UN reports on that government's behavior in the DRC, we must overcome our regret over what happened 18 years ago. As an NGO letter to President Obama points out, the United States is now out of step with our European allies, who have cut aid to Rwanda because of their interference in the DRC, as recommended by the UN Group of Experts in their recent reports. The Group of Experts also recommends imposing sanctions on responsible Rwandan officials, such as Defense Minister General James Kabarebe.

Additionally, the Government of the DRC has failed to ensure that its military adequately provides security for its citizens. In fact, the National Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) also is alleged to be a perpetrator of human rights violations in the East. Security sector reform is critical in the DRC, and the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) has not been able to completely

train military containing elements that too often terrorize their own people instead of protecting them.

At this point, it is vital to understand what the administration intends to do about the UN reports on Rwanda's violation of the arms embargo on non-state groups in eastern DRC and how this impacts U.S. relations with Rwanda. Furthermore, we must know how the administration intends to deal with the DRC government in light of its deficiencies in security sector reform. This hearing also will take a comprehensive look at who is responsible for the insecurity in eastern Congo beyond the two government and the militias.

Most attention is being paid to the M23 rebel movement in eastern Congo, and justifiably so in light of their recent seizure of territory and overall destructive impact on the people of eastern Congo. However, there are reportedly as many as two dozen armed groups terrorizing Congolese in this region. According to a November 2012 report from Oxfam, *Commodities of War*, nine of these militias are believed to be most prominent. They range from those with a focus on Rwanda or Uganda, those that were formed in response to the flight of perpetrators of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda to the DRC or those singularly focused on the DRC itself. Whatever the reason for their founding, these militias have terrorized the people of eastern Congo and the DRC as a whole. We must identify their support base and end the flow of arms and other aid that enables their ongoing reign of terror.

According to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), insecurity in eastern Congo has displaced approximately 2.4 million people nationwide, especially in the East. Despite longstanding conflict in eastern Congo, OCHA estimates that the majority of displaced persons typically returns to their areas of origin within six to 18 months of their initial displacement and require minimal return assistance. While that may be true, it does not account for the kind of life Congolese will have once they can return to their homes.

Women continue to be targeted for abuse in DRC. A study that recently appeared in the *American Journal of Public Health* in May 2011 concluded that an average of 48 women and girls are raped every hour in this country. So, as with our February 2nd and September 19th hearings on the DRC this year, more than 100 females in DRC will have been raped before our hearing today is ended. Their rejection by their families and communities casts a cloud over future efforts to recreate communities destroyed by militias in the DRC. This is an issue that must be addressed by Congolese themselves – sooner rather than later.

Since our hearing in September, M23 made significant gains in territorial control, occupying Goma for 10 days while moving southward, potentially toward the South Kivu town of Bukavu. However, international pressure played a major role in the group ending its advance southward and withdrawing from Goma town by early December. DRC President Joseph Kabila's government and the M23 rebels reportedly have agreed to peace talks in Kampala sponsored by the Government of Uganda. There have been peace talks and peace accords in the DRC before, and they didn't hold. Will this effort achieve lasting peace?

The DRC is home to abundant mineral wealth, including 70% of the world's coltan (used to make vital components of cell phones and other electronic equipment), 30% of the world's diamond reserves and vast deposits of cobalt, copper and bauxite. Unfortunately, these natural resources have attracted international looters and fuelled civil war. Now oil has been discovered

in eastern DRC. Can a way be found to prevent the DRC's blessings from being turned into curses?

The tragic genocide in Rwanda in 1994 has had lasting repercussions in the DRC, but since the 1880s, resentment over the perceived influx of people considered foreigners in eastern DRC has contributed to conflict in this region, including two regional wars. Various leaders in the region have used this antipathy for political purposes, pitting their supporters against their perceived opponents. Can the inter-ethnic problems in the DRC and its neighbors be finally resolved so that a lasting peace among all the people in the DRC can be achieved?

Our witnesses today are well-positioned to address questions regarding a path toward sustainable peace in the DRC and the obstacles that lie in that path. It is time now to find a way to bring to an end the suffering of the people of the DRC.