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Resolving the Political Crisis in

the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Chairman Chris Smith (R-NJ)
House Hearing of the African, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and International
Organizations Subcommittee
Excerpts of remark
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Overwhelming majorities of Americans—some 60-64% according to pollsters—support legal protection for pain-capable unborn children.

Today we know that unborn babies not only die but suffer excruciating pain during dismemberment abortion—a cruelty that rips arms and legs off a helpless child.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo was supposed to conduct elections one year ago this month in order to achieve the required transition of political power by December 19. However, after years of stalling on making preparations for elections, the Government of the DRC failed to hold elections last year and relied on a constitutional provision that President Joseph Kabila could not step down until an election was held to select a replacement.

This interpretation is in apparent contradiction to other constitutional provisions requiring elections to be held on time and limiting Kabila to two terms. The election commission has just announced that elections cannot be held until sometime in late 2018, with an inauguration in early 2019. The prolonging of the Kabila regime has ratcheted up tensions in the country.
Polling has indicated that a majority of Congolese want the Kabila government to end and be replaced by a transitional government until a new one can be elected.

Enduring conflict hotspots in eastern DRC have seen recent flare-ups, while new hotspots have emerged in previously relatively stable areas, such as the central Kasai region and southeastern Tanganyika province. The conflicts in Kasai and Tanganyika alone have caused the displacement of nearly 2 million people since mid-2016, giving DRC one of the highest rates of human displacement in the world. Political unrest in urban centers, a string of large prison breaks, and violent attacks in Kinshasa

by members of a religious sect that has declared itself in opposition to Kabila have further contributed to worsening insecurity.

The conflict in Kasai, which reportedly was first sparked in 2016 by the murder of a traditional leader by state security forces, has become a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, featuring severe atrocities and the widespread recruitment and abuse of children. Meanwhile, the ongoing conflict in eastern DRC at one time saw violent activity by two dozen militia groups and an out-of-control national army, resulting in the systematic rape of about 50 women and girls each hour.

This hearing is intended to look at possible solutions to a political stalemate that could very well lead to further violence and upheaval in a large African country bordering on nine neighbors. It follows a successful resolution on DRC that I introduced and was passed by the House last year and new legislation that Ranking Member Bass and I are introducing soon.

We understand that there are no easy solutions to the current crisis in DRC. A negotiated transition likely could be achieved if President Kabila were convinced that neither he nor his family would be prosecuted for human rights violations or corruption. However, that would reward them for abusing their citizens and plundering the country's resources, and that is even if members of his government were not covered.

A palace coup might take place to oust Kabila. That is not unknown in the DRC. Kabila's father, Laurent Kabila, was assassinated in office in 2001. Mobutu Sese Seko, who the elder Kabila had overthrown, had himself overthrown an elected government in 1965. He was chased from power and fled into exile in 1997. However, a coup would not support international efforts to instill democratic practices in the DRC and could lead to protracted in-fighting and national chaos.

The status quo, as detailed earlier, is already leading to growing violence and will not lead to a peaceful solution the longer a transition is delayed. In fact, it is more likely that violence could escalate and spill over into neighboring countries as did conflict in 1996-97 and 1998-2003.

Over the past year, we have heard many promises by the Government of the DRC about when elections would be held. There have been several dates given for when voter registration would be completed during this past year. The current government timetable calls for voter registration to extend to a point at which elections couldn't be held in the DRC until late 2018 with an inauguration early in 2019. That would mean that Joseph Kabila would have had an extra half-term in office, when the constitution precluded him from going past December 2016.

Consequently, we will today hear from the State Department on our government's diplomatic efforts to resolve the transition stalemate and the U.S. Agency for International Development on our government's programs on the ground to promote democracy and free and fair elections.

Our second panel today consists of scholars and activists who can give us their informed suggestions on how we can break this political stalemate and prevent more bloodshed in the DRC.

Again, no solution will be easy or without cost, but non-action would have an even higher cost in human lives. That we must not tolerate.