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The Democratic Republic of the Congo: Securing Peace in the Midst of Tragedy

Statement at Congressional Hearing on the Congo
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights
Chairman Chris Smith (NJ-04)
March 8, 2011

Good afternoon, and thank you for joining us for this important hearing on the Democratic Republic of the Congo at this critical juncture of its history.

As one might conclude from the significant media interest evident in the room, we have a special guest witness joining us to spotlight public attention on the DRC. I am grateful to Ben Affleck for agreeing to be here to share his perspective and that of the Eastern Congo Initiative that he founded. He is to be highly commended for contributing his time, finances and fame to bring the world's attention to the needs of a people who have suffered too much for too long.

I would also like to recognize Ms. Cindy McCain who is with us today. Ms. McCain is a Founding Member of and investor in the Eastern Congo Initiative, and shares Mr. Affleck's dedication to ending the suffering in this region. She also has dedicated her time and energy to a number of other very worthwhile projects. She serves on the boards of directors of several nonprofit philanthropies, including Operation: Smile, which provides reconstructive surgery to children with facial deformities, and the land mine removal group, the HALO trust.

Mr. Affleck and his organization are making a major contribution in focusing political will on resolving the crises in the DRC and bringing constructive recommendations to the table. But just as importantly, he is setting an example for all of us as to the need to direct whatever

resources and influence we may have to help those less fortunate and without a voice to help themselves. And for his presence, perspective and example, the Subcommittee is most appreciative.

I am also grateful to our other distinguished witnesses for being here. We look forward to examining the Administration's current strategy for and involvement in the DRC with Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of African Affairs, Mr. Donald Yamamoto, and USAID's Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Bureau for Africa, Rajakumari Jandhyala. We will hear about Catholic Relief Service's experience in the DRC, particularly in addressing the abhorrent and widespread practice of sexual violence as a weapon of war, from their Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Advisor, Francisca Vigaud-Walsh. And finally, the Subcommittee welcomes once again John Prendergast of the Enough Project, to learn from his extraordinary expertise in the region particularly on the issue of conflict minerals. Mr. Prendergast reminds us boldly in his testimony that the conflict minerals provision – Section 1502 – requires the Obama Administration to develop a strategy for addressing linkages between the trade in conflict minerals, armed groups and human rights abusers in eastern Congo by January 17th. This strategy has not yet been substantiated – an obvious question for Ambassador Yamamoto.

An individual from the DRC was invited to testify at this hearing, but unfortunately arrangements could not be made in time. The Democratic Republic of the Congo will be an ongoing focus of attention of this Subcommittee, and I am certain that we will hear from DRC citizens and indigenous activists at a future hearing.

I had the privilege of travelling to the DRC in 2008, and I still have vivid memories of both the suffering and the courage of the Congolese people. A highlight of my visit was meeting Doctor Jo and Lynn Lusi, founders of the HEAL Africa Hospital in Goma. I met with several women who had been subjected to severe sexual violence including rape and spoke to many women who were in the process of healing and recovery. The courage, resilience and resolve of the victims to overcome was astonishing. And the meticulous care and compassion of the hospital staff was absolutely remarkable.

I am pleased to know that USAID has supported fistula prevention and treatment in the DRC since 2005, including 1,000 repairs at the Heal Africa and Panzi hospitals in FY 2010. In 2005, I sponsored legislation that included authorization of assistance to establish centers for the treatment of obstetric fistula in developing countries. This legislation passed the House, but unfortunately did not get through the Senate for unrelated reasons. However, Mr. Kent Hill, then-USAID Assistant Administrator for Global Health, agreed to significantly bolster USAID's funding of fistula programming. The women of the DRC together with thousands of other women around the world have benefited as a result.

As the Prime Sponsor of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, and reauthorizations in 2003 and 2005, I am especially interested in hearing from the administration about DRC's tier III ranking – has it improved since the Trafficking in Person's Report – and what has and can be done to reintegrate former child soldiers.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has an abundance of valuable natural resources, water, arable land, and people, making the DRC a potential leader in terms of prosperity and development on the Continent. But like too many of its neighbors, it faces enormous challenges.

The people of the DRC have endured on-going violence and bloodshed for decades. The country has been the scene of one of the longest and deadliest man-made humanitarian crises in the world, characterized by two major civil wars involving seven neighboring countries; multiple cross-border conflicts; fighting by and among foreign proxies, militia groups and rebel movements; illicit activities including the illegal exploitation of mineral resources; an absence of governance; human rights atrocities directed against civilians by all parties, including a predatory Congolese military; and an unreliable United Nations peacekeeping force. Millions of people in the DRC have died from wars and war-related malnutrition and disease since 1998, and nearly 2 million are displaced. The sufferings of war have been compounded by horrific human rights abuses committed against innocent women, men and children.

The country as a whole faces enormous challenges. The DRC is one of the five poorest countries in the world, with 80 percent of its people living on just \$2 a day. Corruption is rampant, as evidenced by the DRC's ranking 164 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index. The country is 10th among the world's 22 high-burden tuberculosis countries, and malaria accounts for 35 percent of the deaths of children under the age of five. Life expectancy is only about 51 years. And an estimated 8.2 million—or one out of eight people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—are orphans and vulnerable children.

Clearly, this country and the surrounding region are in desperate need of a peace tourniquet and the coordinated efforts of the world community to prevent a complete loss of its peoples' hope for the future.

The upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in November render this a particularly critical time to focus our attention on the United State's strategy for addressing the many issues confronting the Congolese government and people. And given that today is International Women's Day, this is a particularly appropriate occasion to recognize the courageous women of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In addition to the hardships that unduly impact women in situations of conflict and underdevelopment, the women of the DRC have had to endure years of brutal victimization of rape and other forms of sexual violence used a weapon of war. An estimated 200,000 women have been raped there since 1998. Their physical and psychological suffering has been compounded by the ongoing absence of measures to prevent future attacks, the impunity with which perpetrators continue in their communities or the military, and the stigma wrongly placed on victims by Congolese society.

A recent report by a UN panel detailed interviews held with victims of sexual violence in the DRC. While the plight of all the victims is heart wrenching, the interviews with those in the Kivus who are still experiencing ongoing armed conflict are worth emphasizing. These women are desperately in need of the most basic necessities – medical care, housing, and a means of supporting themselves and their children. But when asked what they would like to have done to restore their lives and regain their dignity, virtually every one responded that peace and security

is their first and most immediate need. They pleaded with the panel to convey this message to the world, because without peace and security, anything else they might acquire could be lost again at any time. A primary goal of this hearing is to answer the pleas of these women.

I now invite our Ranking Member, Mr. Payne from New Jersey, to give his opening statement.