

**Testimony by U.S. Agency for International Development
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Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights
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“Resolving the Political Crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo”

Good afternoon Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today about the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). It is always an honor to have the opportunity to discuss our work with supporters of Africa. For me personally, it is a pleasure to be back testifying before this Subcommittee.

USAID has maintained a long-term relationship with the DRC and its people since the country became independent in 1960. United States foreign assistance support is two-fold, including both long term investments in development and in urgent humanitarian assistance that saves lives. With its vast mineral wealth, the country has tremendous opportunity for economic growth that could lift its citizens out of poverty and propel it into middle-income status. Instead, protracted political uncertainty is fueling violence and instability, and prevents the realization of the country’s full potential.

The Current Situation

The DRC is the size of Western Europe with a population close to 100 million, and its development needs are vast. The country is near the bottom of most development indices, including the United Nations Human Development Index and the Global Hunger Index. The U.S. Government recognizes that unless there is greater investment in institutional capacity building of the government, rule of law, respect for human rights, civil society, and private institutions, the country will continue to be a fragile state. Our foreign assistance goals support investments in these areas. USAID, in coordination with other donors, helps provide access to

health and education services, supports democratic structures, improves food security, and protects natural resources.

However, the reality is that the DRC is teetering on the brink of a crisis such as it has not seen since the formal end of the Second Congo War in 2003. The country's grave political crisis is driven by a number of factors. First, the government failed to hold elections at the end of President Joseph Kabila's constitutionally mandated term in 2016. Second, the government has taken harsh steps to repress peaceful citizen and opposition protests, and continues to target and imprison journalists, human rights activists and opposition leaders. Third, worsening conflict in the eastern region of the country along a new rebellion in the Kasai region and fighting in Tanganyika Province have generated such additional humanitarian needs that the Interagency Standing Committee — a group of U.N. and non-U.N. global humanitarian agencies — has declared the highest level emergency for parts of the DRC for the next six months. Due to the political crisis and continued electoral delays, the mandates of all elected DRC government officials have officially expired.

While an election alone will not solve the DRC's many challenges, credible, inclusive presidential and legislative elections are critical to ensuring a peaceful transition of power, reducing the risk of widespread violence, and strengthening the country's democratic institutions and economic development. A number of important hurdles to free, fair and peaceful elections remain. We are pleased with the recent release of an electoral calendar, but voter registration, already months behind schedule must be completed, revised electoral laws passed and funding appropriated to cover the cost of organizing national elections. Finally, the Government of the DRC needs to take immediate steps to allow civil society, journalists, and citizens to express themselves; protect the human rights of its citizens; and ensure that all political parties are afforded equitable access to the media and their rights to assemble peacefully are respected.

USAID Support for Elections

Alongside other U.S. Government agencies, USAID remains committed to supporting the timely organization of peaceful, credible, and inclusive elections that reflect the will of the Congolese people, and to that end, we have provided approximately \$37 million in election and political

processes programming since 2013. This funding includes support for domestic election observation, civic and voter education, targeted technical assistance to the electoral commission, political party strengthening, and electoral justice.

USAID's election observation activity is implemented by the local Episcopal Justice and Peace Organization, the leading Congolese election observation organization, and builds their capacity to train and deploy long- and short-term domestic election observers in accordance with international standards. In preparation for the elections, the observers have been monitoring and issuing fact-based reports on the voter registration process. The civic and voter education program is helping more than 35 different Congolese civil society organizations to inform citizens - and particularly women, youth and other traditionally marginalized groups - about the electoral process, their rights and role as voters, and the importance of peaceful participation in elections. A grant to the United Nations Development Program provides technical assistance to the electoral commission for operations, logistics and effective use of information technology.

USAID's multi-year political party strengthening program, meanwhile, provides training to ten political parties – five from the ruling majority and five from the opposition - to better represent and respond to citizens' concerns, and improve their internal management and organization. A particular focus of the program is to increase the ability of youth and women to act as change agents for party modernization, building their skills and preparing them to stand for election or internal party leadership positions.

Finally, our human rights and electoral justice activity strengthens the capacity of national-level justice actors, the courts, and civil society organizations to conduct legal education, provide legal services, and monitor and respond to human rights violations, including electoral disputes.

Conclusion

The stakes in the DRC, and for its neighbors, could not be higher. Absent strong, principled regional and international interventions, particularly but not limited to diplomatic pressure and donor support for a peaceful democratic transition through inclusive, credible elections, the country could spiral into a regional conflict like we saw twenty years ago. We are again

encouraged by the announcement of an electoral calendar, but will now need to see some confidence building measures to ensure that this timeline is respected and implemented, and all measures are taken for free, credible, and peaceful elections. This includes an end to politically motivated prosecutions, the release of political prisoners, and respect for the right of peaceful assembly and association, so that opposition parties and civil society organizations may hold peaceful public meetings without government interference or intimidation. We will continue to support civic education, domestic observation and other efforts to stimulate citizen participation in and bring greater transparency to this critical process.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bass, and Members of the Subcommittee. I look forward to responding to your questions.