Cover Photo: A displaced woman stands in front of her shelter in an informal camp along the Djugu-Bunia road.
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>SUMMARY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>BACKGROUND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>HUMANITARIAN OVERVIEW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>CONDITIONS OF THE DISPLACED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Displacement in Beni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Displacement from Djugu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>DONOR FATIGUE AND INFLEXIBILITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harmful Trade-Offs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Lack of Funds Equates to a Lack of Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>COORDINATING THE RESPONSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The UN Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Cluster System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protection Mechanisms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cooperating with MONUSCO on Protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SUMMARY

For decades, armed conflicts have ravaged the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), resulting in massive displacement and critical humanitarian needs. A complex mix of emergencies have plagued the country—from brutal armed violence to interethnic conflict to sweeping Cholera and Ebola epidemics. These emergencies, both acute and protracted, are being exacerbated by high social and political tensions in the lead up to national elections, which are scheduled for December 2018. The elections are two years overdue. Although President Joseph Kabila has announced that he will not run for office again, there are growing concerns that the elections may not be fair and that the transfer of power will not be peaceful.

The national elections are of critical importance to the stability and future of the DRC. However, they have overshadowed a devastating humanitarian crisis, which has degenerated into one of the world’s worst humanitarian emergencies over the last two years. During this period, a new surge in conflict and bloodshed has swept across several DRC provinces, killing thousands. The potential for further deterioration continues to rise. Currently, over 13.1 million Congolese require humanitarian assistance—about the same number of people in need as those within Syria. An estimated 5 million Congolese have been displaced—internally and into neighboring countries, including 2 million people in 2017 alone, making the DRC’s displacement crisis the most severe in Africa. Millions of Congolese are not receiving the life-saving aid they require. To make matters worse, international funding is at its lowest in a decade. In the worst-affected provinces—Tanganyika, North and South Kivu, Ituri, and the Kasais—aid is present but is spotty and often slow.

In June 2018, Refugees International (RI) traveled to northeastern DRC to conduct a field mission to Bunia and the Djugu territory of Ituri province and to Beni city in North Kivu. The situations in these locations exemplify the challenging cycle in which new and acute crises erupt onto a humanitarian landscape already riddled with protracted suffering. This dynamic, when coupled with insufficient funding and poor coordination, force humanitarian organizations to divert resources to new crises—often having to close offices and leave behind populations in dire need.

The obstacles faced by humanitarians in North Kivu and Ituri are alarming. Unfortunately, they are also representative of the challenges across the massive country. Many organizations have been ill prepared to respond to the violence and displacement that has surged since late 2016. This was apparent during the unexpected outbreak of acute crises in the Kasais and in Ituri, where limited funding, little contingency planning, and a minimal staff presence delayed the response. In North Kivu, where conflict and displacement have been constant for years, aid delivery is slowing down and is increasingly diverted with each new outbreak.

In early August 2018, cases of Ebola were detected in North Kivu and then in Ituri. While organizations have rushed to provide much-needed support to contain the epidemic, the high levels of internal displacement in these provinces and significant shortages in funds and staff will continue to be an obstacle. While the Ebola response is being funded by separate resources, the diversion of staff could impact responses to other key humanitarian challenges.

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RI appreciates the importance of ensuring that free and fair elections take place in December as planned. This is vital for the long-term stability of the country and the region more broadly. It is clear that governance and peacebuilding efforts must improve. Nonetheless, it is also vital for donors, UN agencies, and other humanitarians to make a concerted effort to immediately alleviate the suffering of the millions of Congolese before the situation further deteriorates. Humanitarian actors must be resourced to assess needs, coordinate efforts, and respond effectively without being forced to abandon people in need. The bottom line is that insufficient funding threatens to unravel decades of investment and push the DRC deeper into chaos.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**For the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo**

- **Acknowledge the severity of the crisis and provide for its citizens**—The DRC government must end its refusal to recognize the scale of country's displacement crisis and declare its intention to assist all those in need to the best of its ability. The government must also cooperate with humanitarian organizations in collecting and disseminating statistics on the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and in assessing their needs.

**For the United Nations and Humanitarian Organizations**

- **Engage donors to fulfill outstanding pledges**—To ensure that humanitarian organizations are not forced to divert funds and staff from areas in need when each new crisis erupts in the DRC, UN leaders—both in country and at the headquarters level—must call upon governments to fulfill their pledges made at the Geneva donor conference on the DRC held in April 2018.

- **Strengthen the efficiency of the UN's Cluster system in the DRC**—Across the DRC, the field-level response coordinators, known as Sub-Cluster leads, must fill positions on a full-time basis and should impartially represent the Cluster and its members. This is vital to give them the capacity to carry out thorough analyses and establish incident-tracking mechanisms to be used by the humanitarian community at large.

- **The UN Refugee Agency (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR) must reestablish its protection presence**—UNHCR must reestablish its presence in areas of need, especially Bunia and Beni city, to monitor protection trends. It must resume its role as the co-lead of the Protection Cluster and Sub-Cluster in these locations and spearhead improved coordination.

- **Implement proven cash intervention models in under-resourced areas**—Given that access, funds, and human resources are limited throughout the country, humanitarian organizations must facilitate the implementation of cash interventions, with due regard to their feasibility and risk.

- **Fill critical information gaps in the displaced and host communities**—There are significant gaps in understanding the numbers of displaced persons, the nature and scope of their needs, and the needs of the communities that host them. With donor support, organizations should make data collection and survey work a high priority in all these areas. This should
be done in conjunction with local organizations and committees for IDPs that have established relations with the displaced persons.

- **Increase awareness in the displaced community of the services available to them**—Because many displaced persons are unaware of the services available to them, it is important for humanitarians to share this information more widely throughout the displaced community to increase awareness of the services provided.

- **Establish information sharing guidelines between the humanitarian sector and the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)**—The humanitarian sector’s Protection Cluster and MONUSCO’s Senior Management Group on Protection must develop information sharing procedures that respect humanitarian principles and civilian-military guidelines. The terms of their cooperation should be included in the UN Humanitarian Country Team’s Protection Strategy.

### For International Donors

- **Increase funding**—Funding shortfalls threaten to unravel decades of investment that helped to end conflict and to begin transitioning to rehabilitation. The provision of more funding—including core, unearmarked monies—will allow organizations to alleviate the growing needs. Donors should fully fund the 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan request from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and should meet this year’s appeal for $1.68 billion.

- **Provide flexible and shorter-term funding for emergencies**—Given the frequent and sudden onset of acute crises in the DRC, donors should provide more flexible funding. This should include an increase in funding for cash interventions and the *Rapid Response to Population Movements* (RRPM), a key joint UN humanitarian tool that pools funding to enable rapid responses to new crises.

- **Provide funding for regions in protracted crises to transition to recovery**—More dedicated funding is needed for regions of the DRC that are in protracted crises to help facilitate the transition to recovery, such as the model used by the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations’ (ECHO) with its Bekou Trust Fund in the Central African Republic.
BACKGROUND

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has long been marred by prolonged conflicts and displacement. Between 1998 and 2003, the DRC was the epicenter of one of the bloodiest conflicts in recent history. UN peacekeepers were brought in to oversee the country’s return to stability. But even after the war, the country continued to be riddled with low-intensity conflict. The peacekeeping mission’s role has grown from monitoring the cease-fire to becoming the UN’s largest blue helmeted force—one tasked with building government capacity and preventing further backsliding into violence.

Since 2016, this fragile peace has been jeopardized by President Joseph Kabila’s postponement of elections, which has led to deadly spikes in violence across the country. This widespread political turmoil—coupled with a severe lack of governance, a corrupt economy, and unaddressed interethnic tensions—has created the conditions for hundreds of overlapping armed groups to wreak havoc across the country. At present, over 5 million people have been displaced—the largest number of people uprooted from their homes on the African continent. Over 2 million of them having been displaced since early 2017. More than 13.1 million Congolese are in need of assistance—about the same number of people in need as in Syria.² Thousands of lives have been lost to cycles of brutal violence. And an alarming 7.7 million people are food insecure, including 2 million children.

In the midst of this crisis, millions of Congolese are not receiving the assistance they require. In a striking turn of events, many donors have responded to the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation over the last two years by decreasing their contributions. During the UN’s April pledging conference in Geneva, donor governments failed to commit even half of the $1.68 billion in aid required for 2018,³ and many of these pledges are still outstanding.⁴ As of July 2018, humanitarian funding is the lowest it has been in a decade.

“Many donors have responded to the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation over the last two years by decreasing their contributions.”

As a result, a worrying dynamic within the DRC—one in which humanitarians are forced to rob Peter to pay Paul—has taken shape since 2016, with new conflicts in the Kasais and Tanganyika, and the renewed conflict in Ituri. These areas had previously been assumed to be stable. In all three crises, the humanitarian community was caught off guard. The response was further slowed by a dearth of new donor funding. To respond, humanitarians were forced to divert resources and staff from other populations they were actively serving to address the sudden onset of acute need.

“A worrying dynamic within the DRC—one in which humanitarians are forced to rob Peter to pay Paul—has taken shape since 2016.”

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². Ibid.
⁴. HRP, 2018 Update, p. 2 (see footnote 1).
For example, in October, the UN declared a Level 3 Emergency; the highest in the UN system and usually designated for entire countries. In the DRC, however, the designation was only for the Kasai, Tanganyika, and South Kivu provinces. This localized designation resulted in funds and staff being diverted to these provinces from other vulnerable areas. UN agencies and other humanitarians were forced to close many of their field offices in the provinces of Ituri and North Kivu. The shortage of aid in most of these two provinces was further exacerbated by the outbreak of conflict in the Djugu territory of Ituri. This outbreak forced humanitarians to once again pull resources from other parts of Ituri or projects in North Kivu in order to respond.

There is little reason to think that the security situation across the DRC is likely to stabilize in the near term. Tensions in the lead up to national elections, which are slated for December 2018, are extremely high. Elections are two years overdue, and President Joseph Kabila will not run for office again. However, there are growing concerns that the elections may not be fair or transparent and that Kabila’s departure from office will not be peaceful. International attention is understandably focused on these elections, but this has come at the cost of addressing the country’s vast humanitarian needs.

Indeed, it is critical for the DRC’s long-term stability that President Kabila lead a peaceful transfer of power. The Congolese deserve no less. However, donors and humanitarians alike must move proactively to alleviate need in what has become one of the most neglected humanitarian crises of our time. The DRC is quickly coming to a breaking point, and there is no more time to waste.

**HUMANITARIAN OVERVIEW**

Currently, ten of Congo’s 26 provinces are in conflict. The UN estimates that 4.5 million Congolese are currently displaced internally, and an additional 735,000 have fled to neighboring countries. Many of the displaced are being sheltered by host communities in the DRC. These communities are carrying the weight of the forgotten crisis.

Responsibility for the crisis ultimately rests with the Congolese government. However, it has consistently denied the extent of the crisis over the last two years. Despite having agreed to the UN’s estimates of IDPs, the government then rejected the figures, stating that the total is closer to 230,000 people. The actions of Kabila’s government underscore his disdain for international presence and scrutiny. Congolese officials shunned the Geneva pledging conference in April and claimed that aid organizations were spreading a “bad image of the [DRC] throughout the world.” The government is shirking its responsibility to protect its own population, which has exacerbated intercommunal tensions and their humanitarian consequences. As a result, millions of Congolese now rely solely on international aid.

Protection risks and violations are prevalent across the DRC. These range from physical violence, torture, and sexual violence to arbitrary arrest and detention, to restrictions on freedom of movement and the recruitment of children by armed groups. These vulnerabilities are only magnified by the lack of support available to victims. Humanitarian organizations lack the financial support to adequately

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5. HRP, 2018 Update (see footnote 1).
monitor and document protection concerns, let alone respond to them. The UN peacekeeping force’s protection efforts are also feeling the squeeze of budget cuts, forcing it to be less present in many areas where protection violations are rampant.

Although some communities fled their homes preemptively, most witnessed brutal violence or were victims of vicious attacks and sexual violence. However, many IDPs told RI that they had yet to receive any form of psychosocial assistance, but strongly desired it. Funding should be made immediately available for the humanitarian community to provide assistance in the forms of access to psychosocial assistance, and sexual and reproductive health services for the victims of gender-based violence.

Access to populations in need is challenging and limited for humanitarian organizations. Not only do security concerns severely inhibit humanitarian access to many areas of tremendous need, but so do destructive rains, weak infrastructure, a lack of logistical capability, and the DRC government’s bureaucratic impediments (tariffs on medicines and food, a difficult visa process, etc.). Donor governments must use their diplomatic channels to call on the DRC government to remove these bureaucratic hindrances.

**CONDITIONS OF THE DISPLACED**

**Displacement in Beni**

Insecurity reigns across North Kivu. The diverging and competing motivations of a myriad of armed groups have led to numerous clashes, massacres, and banditry. These brutal events have caused massive displacement; with over 1 million people having been
forced to flee their homes. As a result, the province has the highest concentration of IDPs within the DRC. Of these IDPs, 88 percent live with host families, with the remainder living in displacement camps.

In Beni city, the capital of the Beni territory of North Kivu, the current wave of displacement has been ongoing for years. Since 2013, mass killings committed by armed groups have been on the rise, forcibly displacing over 180,000 people within Beni city and its outskirts since the uptick in violence. This has pushed populations from surrounding villages and the outskirts of Beni into the city center. However, over the last few years, violence has been consistently creeping closer and closer. The city is surrounded by violence and is under a tremendous amount of pressure, with increasing needs—unmet by the humanitarian response—and a crippled economy.

Instability has cut off the city of Beni from many of its food sources on the rural outskirts, and most people no longer have a source of income. Market prices have dramatically increased, and both the displaced and host communities struggle to feed their families. During RI’s time in Beni, it was very clear that the needs of the displaced were not dissimilar from those of the families welcoming them. RI met with families that had been displaced for years without ever receiving assistance from the aid community.

Access to food and basic services is extremely limited. Despair has forced many IDPs to go back to their homes and fields, in the hope of being able to farm before conditions permit a sustainable return. Those who return often confront the same violence from which they fled. Elisabeth, a woman currently living in Beni city, tried to go home some months ago with her children; but on the very day they returned, armed groups kidnapped three of her children. To protect the others, she has returned to the city, but she fears that she will never see her kidnapped children again.

The city’s dwindling economy has forced many schools and health centers to shut their doors, because they go unused as residents do not have the funds to access them. A handful of organizations have been able to support local health centers, but these interventions have been limited, and most of the displaced with whom RI met were unaware of the services available to them or if they were eligible to receive financed health services. As cases of Ebola increase in the outskirts of Beni city, health actors have been intervening in the city to stop its spread. However, their presence does not translate to the provision of health services for displaced or host populations.

Jonathan, a displaced grandfather, came from the outlying village of Eringeti in 2015. He explained to the RI team that witnessing the brutal murders of his extended family forced him to flee to Beni city to live with his son, Jules. Jonathan told us, “At my age, I shouldn’t have to suffer like this.” Since then, all his children have followed him to Beni city from the villages where they had built their homes. Almost four years later, Jules now hosts 23 people in his three-room home. And they, too, report having received no humanitarian assistance.

“At my age, I shouldn’t have to suffer like this.”

- JONATHAN, A DISPLACED GRANDFATHER LIVING IN BENI CITY

Jonathan’s story is increasingly common. Many host families have up to 30 IDPs living with them. These families, whose members barely have the means to provide for themselves, are also struggling to provide for the new additions to their households. Illnesses are prevalent and spread quickly within these overcrowded homes.

There are no displacement camps in Beni city. In other parts of the Beni territory, there are informal IDP settlements that are reported to receive more attention from aid organizations than the populations residing within Beni city. However, numerous nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are based in the city, and their staff members travel out from it daily. The fact that so many NGOs operate from Beni but offer extremely limited assistance, if any, within the city itself has caused a tremendous amount of frustration and feelings of neglect among those in need.

Displacement from Djugu

To the north, Ituri had been relatively peaceful after the severe conflict from 1999 to 2003, until fighting erupted in December 2017 between the Hema, who are farmers, and the Lendu people, who are herders. The scale of this violence was shocking. Despite historical tensions between the two peoples, there is little consensus on the exact cause for this flare-up. Its second wave came in February 2018, when a dramatic spike in violence caused over 130,000 to flee their villages and form informal displacement camps throughout the province and forced over 70,000 to cross Lake Albert into neighboring Uganda.
seeking safe refuge. Over a hundred villages were burnt down, and thousands remain unwilling to return until they are certain it will be safe. Though violence has mostly abated, displaced people are afraid to return, they do not have the funds to return and rebuild their damaged properties, and many believe violence could erupt again at any moment.

Displaced communities have temporarily resettled in various camps throughout the province or have been residing in the homes of friends and family. The majority of the Hema fled south to the city of Bunia, or to villages along the Djugu-Bunia road, whereas many from the Lendu community fled into the Mahagi and Irumu territories.

Following the second spike in violence in early February, populations formed two displacement camps in the city of Bunia, on the grounds of the hospital and near a school. In these camps, aid is limited. Food distributions occur on a monthly basis in both, but many of the IDPs stated that the food rations were insufficient to last the month. In April, the government authorities supported the return of 398 households from Bunia to their areas of origin. The government provided kits with basic nonfood items and

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transportation back, but the majority of those who chose to return found that their home areas were still dangerous. Further, they had no access to their fields because of security concerns or found that their crops had been stolen or burnt. Most chose to return to living in camps in Bunia, and they do not anticipate returning until security concerns have been addressed and the dry season comes to an end in the fall.

The residents of the camps that RI visited along the Bunia-Djugu road, in the villages of Iga Barrière and Lopa, stated that they were not receiving any food or shelter assistance. However, the camps were equipped with water and sanitation facilities, and the residents reported having access to local health centers that were being supported by NGOs. RI advocates encountered a three-generational family returning home on foot after having lived in a displacement camp for a few months. They told RI that they had little information on the security conditions in their village, but that camp conditions were so poor that they preferred to return to rebuild their home and farm their lands.

In Bunia, a displaced father from Blukwa, Djugu, whose family is now living with his sister and her children, explained that he preferred to stay with his family instead of living in a camp. He proclaimed that, because of the shortage of aid in the camps, “living in the site is to go suffer for nothing. We may as well do it here with family.” For those living with host families in Bunia, little aid is available. Though there are health centers that have been bolstered to offer services to IDPs for free, many are unaware of what services were available to them or where. It is important for humanitarians to share information more widely throughout the displaced community in order to increase awareness of service provision. However, this should be done in parallel with the provision of more support for existing health centers from donors and aid agencies.

Much like those in Beni, the vast majority of affected populations from Djugu are agriculturalists. Persistent violence has not only uprooted them from their homes but has also cut them off from their sole sources of income and food. Now, they have missed two planting seasons, from which they could store food for their families or sell to markets. Without this food or cash from sales, and with the onset of the dry season, Djugu residents are food insecure. They are unable to afford the limitedly available food at prices that have more than doubled.

Given that crops were burnt or stolen, residents will not return before they are able to plant and harvest, even if security were to be reestablished. Malnutrition is prevalent, and the risks for further deterioration are high for all people in the affected regions in Ituri, not only the IDPs. The capacity—in terms of both financing and expertise—to respond to malnutrition is extremely limited. Despite the presence of the UN World Food Program (WFP), current aid level may not be enough, especially given that nutrition remains one of the lowest funded sectors in the response.

DONOR FATIGUE AND INFLEXIBILITY

The country’s cycle of acute and protracted crises has created severe donor fatigue and forced humanitarians to triage the funding they do receive. For their part, international donors are frustrated to see that the cycles of violence and humanitarian need continue. This frustration was on display at April’s donor conference in Geneva. Governments failed to commit even half of the $1.68

15. Humanitarian Conference on the DRC, “Donors Announce $528” (see footnote 3).
billion in aid required to provide emergency assistance in the DRC for this year alone. As of July 2018, many of these pledges have yet to be fulfilled.

Some donors have given more. The United Kingdom, for example, increased funding from $46 million in 2017 to $141 million for 2018. In contrast, the United States’ commitment of $67 million was a sharp decrease from the $202 million given in 2017. Adapting to this shortfall, humanitarian organizations have often cut assistance to ongoing emergencies within the DRC in order to divert funds, logistical support, and human resources to the country’s newest catastrophes. Many of the aid workers with whom RI met lamented that the response was not comprehensive due to a lack of funds.

As aggregate donor commitments have declined, humanitarian needs have doubled in Congo from 2017 to 2018. Despite the worsening situation, funding has not increased in parallel. As of July 2018, funding is lower than any previous year in the last decade. As graph (figure one) shows, the funding gap is enormous. If inadequate funding continues to prevent aid organizations from providing assistance, they will be unable to mitigate the risk of further deterioration. The human consequences will be catastrophic. It goes without saying: Underfunding costs lives.

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16. HRP, 2018 Update (see footnote 1).
It is paramount to keep the crisis on the global radar. Donors and UN leadership, both globally and in country, must play a key role by engaging with the countries that have not contributed funds to meet this year’s appeal and to ensure that the pledges made at the Geneva conference are fulfilled without further delays. Providing more funding for UN agencies and NGOs operating in the DRC will ensure that with each new crisis that erupts, agencies and organizations are no longer forced to dangerously divert funds and staff from areas that continue to require sustained support.

Donors should also make more flexible funding available for humanitarian agencies to allow for rapid response to newly erupting crises. The provision of supplementary core, unearmarked funding would allow humanitarian organizations to allocate funds where and when they are most needed. Additionally, donors should resource contingency planning and emergency response mechanisms to prepare for new crises. This would include tools, such as the UN and humanitarian community’s Rapid Response to Population Movements (RRPM), which are activated to respond immediately in the event of a sudden outbreak of conflict. Sufficiently funding the RRPM would bolster its ability to fulfill its mandate by quickly assessing and responding to the needs of newly displaced communities.

For areas experiencing protracted conflicts, more innovative funding mechanisms are needed. In the neighboring Central African Republic, the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) has created the Bekou Trust Fund—a model that should be adopted in the DRC by ECHO itself or other members of the donor community. The trust fund is a fast and flexible tool that unites different budgetary instruments from the European Commission to enable projects that provide quick funding and go beyond urgent humanitarian aid to eventually link it to rehabilitation. Though the Central African Republic model would need to be altered to be suitable for a substantially larger country like the DRC, the approach and lessons learned could be used to create a similar fund to support the transition from emergency to development.

**Harmful Trade-Offs**

The DRC is not the first country to experience significant donor fatigue. However, this fatigue, coupled with the sharp spike in need over the last 18 months, has resulted in a deadly disparity. Humanitarians cannot be expected to effectively provide for 13.1 million people with 22 percent of the required funding (see figure one). Between June and November 2017, North Kivu witnessed the departure of 20 protection aid organizations due to the diversion of funds. When aid organizations are forced to abandon a protracted crisis, that crisis does not resolve itself. It festers, and the scope of the problem grows. This dynamic was on display in Beni city, where the needs of the displaced have mushroomed since humanitarians were forced to pull out. Access to water decreases over time. Malnutrition skyrockets. Protection concerns are magnified. And the total cost of fixing the problem will be greater than if aid groups had not been forced to disengage in the first place.

“When aid organizations are forced to abandon a protracted crisis, that crisis does not resolve itself. It festers, and the scope of the problem grows.”

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18. Known as the RRMP in the DRC.
Ituri and North Kivu were not included in the UN’s 2017 Level 3 Emergency (L3) designation, which covered Kasai, Tanganyika, and South Kivu provinces. As a result, humanitarian organizations ceased or reduced operations in the former provinces despite the persistence of significant need. UNHCR had to close offices in Beni in North Kivu and Bunia in Ituri, leaving tremendous gaps in monitoring protection concerns in both areas. As a result, North Kivu’s 1 million IDPs experienced a weakening in the humanitarian response to their ever-present needs.

Organizations were ill prepared to respond when violence surged in Ituri only two months after the L3 was declared in other provinces. In order to respond to new violence in Ituri, aid in North Kivu was further diminished. A representative from the donor community bluntly told RI that “all good staff from Beni [in North Kivu] moved to Bunia” after the arrival of IDPs in the city. For the WFP, providing food to these populations came at a cost. The agency had to stop its food distributions in North Kivu—the province with the highest number of IDPs in the country—to provide for food distribution in Ituri. The mathematics of these trade-offs is shocking. Aid organizations must repeatedly cut off aid to people who are still in dire conditions to assist newly affected populations.

The Lack of Funds Equates to a Lack of Understanding

As humanitarians have been forced to pull back, they have lost their eyes and ears. National and local authorities often issue alerts regarding a worsening situation. However, countless humanitarian organizations have lost the capacity to verify alerts or to reach people who may be in dire need. As of April, OCHA estimated that over 250,000 displaced people in both

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North Kivu and Ituri had yet to have their needs assessed by humanitarian actors.\textsuperscript{21} Moreover, the majority of internally displaced Congolese are finding shelter within host communities. The ability of humanitarians to assess vulnerability in host communities is particularly weak. Some actors worry that the needs are underreported. Without proper surveys of the displaced and comprehensive mapping of vulnerability, aid providers are unable to channel their assistance to those most in need. The result is a potentially dangerous misallocation of very limited resources, which could put lives at risk.

The significant obstacles in reaching people in need, especially when paired with poor funding, require efficient and innovative solutions. Given that access, funds, and human resources are limited throughout the country, more must be done to assess feasibility and risks, and in turn to implement cash interventions in many of these regions. Another cost-effective solution to access and logistical impediments is for donors and international NGOs to form partnerships with Congolese NGOs and committees that are well established and are connected to local communities. These actors know valuable information and have ties to the groups of people who may be difficult to locate (i.e., those in displaced settlements in remote areas, or dispersed and displaced families living within host communities).

COORDINATING THE RESPONSE

The UN Leadership

The scale and complexity of the DRC’s humanitarian situation requires strong leadership. However, the most senior international humanitarian officer in the DRC must play

\textsuperscript{21} OCHA, “Plan de réponse d’urgence, Provinces du Nord-Kivu et de l’Ituri” (see footnote 9).
three different and distinct roles inside the UN system—as deputy special representative of the secretary general, as resident coordinator, and as humanitarian coordinator. Although such an arrangement is standard practice for large, multidimensional UN peace missions, these three sets of competing responsibilities can be difficult to execute in a large and complex mission, such as the one in the DRC.

“UN leadership has recently been focused on political and security issues related to the upcoming elections—which is understandable. However, over the last year, this may have drawn time, attention, and resources away from some of the DRC’s local, protracted humanitarian crises.”

In the DRC, the UN leadership has recently been focused on political and security issues related to the upcoming elections—which is understandable. However, over the last year, this may have drawn time, attention, and resources away from some of the DRC’s local, protracted humanitarian crises. The recent appointment of a deputy humanitarian coordinator is thus a welcome development.

The Cluster System

According to humanitarian actors, coordination among the organizations involved is suffering due to weak leadership. The Cluster system—the structure responsible for coordinating UN and non-UN humanitarian organizations based on intervention sectors—is not sufficiently robust throughout the country. Clusters usually serve as a platform to share information, analyze data, and draft strategies to address issues. As organizations struggle to gather thorough data because of funding shortages, there is a lack of information to be shared with other actors. Funding should be made available to organizations with the ability and know-how to carry out thorough analyses and establish incident-tracking mechanisms to be shared and used by the community at large.

Coordination is further weakened by the competing responsibilities of the Cluster leads. At the national level in Kinshasa, leads fulfill these duties on a full-time basis. However, across the DRC, the Sub-Clusters’ leads, who are tasked to coordinate at the field level, are only seconded on a part-time basis from the organizations for which they work. Many are too busy with their other responsibilities, and they have little time or capacity for thorough analyses. This limits their ability to create Cluster strategies in cooperation with the other actors, and it also inhibits their ability to be impartial because of their ties to their permanent employing organization.

To remedy this situation, the Sub-Cluster leads in field offices across the country should fill these positions on a full-time basis. This will enable them to lead better analyses and develop strategies and will also allow them to impartially represent the Cluster and its members. As suggested by an aid worker, the humanitarian leaders should consider locating the offices of the Cluster and Sub-Cluster leads within the OCHA compounds across the country, to maintain their impartiality.

Protection Mechanisms

When it comes to the Protection Cluster specifically, RI identified weaknesses that go beyond the challenges faced by other Clusters: It lacks the capacity for thorough analysis, mapping, and protection incident tracking due to financial shortages. In addition, organizations charged with protection should do more to prioritize it within their work. Until
recently, the Protection Cluster was led by UNHCR, but it has since come to be co-led by UNHCR and the Norwegian Refugee Council. This is a positive development, but the division of responsibilities between the two leads has yet to be determined and could result in gaps and overlapping efforts. Due to office closures, UNHCR’s protection staff presence across the areas of need is spotty, and this hampers its protection monitoring but also prevents it from co-leading field-level protection Clusters. Thus, it is vital that UNHCR reestablish the presence of protection staff throughout the country’s areas in need, but especially in Bunia and Beni city, and co-lead the protection coordination there.

In order to ensure the centrality of protection in all humanitarian action in the DRC, the UN Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) developed and adopted a Protection Strategy in April 2018. The strategy, which aims to provide "a vision and operational guide to strengthen the protection of people affected by crises," is a vital tool to guide humanitarian action in an environment riddled with gross protection violations. Its recent adoption is a positive step, and the document has come a long way since its first draft—but it is still too vague. The DRC’s protection violations stem from decades of armed violence—of political, intercommunal, and interethnic origin; from dangerous political standoffs—as well as natural disasters and health epidemics. This multidimensional crisis requires precise and context-specific guidelines for humanitarian actors.

The noticeable absence of any mention of the UN peacekeeping force in the Protection Strategy is a key problem. Like other Protection Strategy documents from countries where humanitarians and peacekeepers intervene, the document should clarify the

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rules of engagement between humanitarian actors and the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (known under the French acronym MONUSCO23) on protection issues. It is a critical mistake that these rules of engagement were excluded, especially because funding shortages have also forced the peacekeeping mission to change its protection approach.

Cooperating with MONUSCO on Protection

The MONUSCO force has an extraordinarily challenging mandate to protect civilians, humanitarian personnel, and human rights defenders, while also supporting the government’s stabilization efforts. For years, peacekeeping missions worldwide have been under pressure to increase their flexibility and responsiveness to protection threats. But as budget cuts force them to scale down, this is proving to be a challenge.

In response to this pressure, and to recent troop and budget cuts, MONUSCO has opted to change its approach from protection through presence to its new “Protection through Projection” model. This calls for the use of rapidly deployable units and the progressive closure of numerous bases across the country, including in North Kivu and Ituri. But this is no easy task when mandates are not matched with the appropriate budgets and air assets.

As the peace operation reduces its field presence, it is looking to humanitarians on the ground to fill information gaps on protection violations in areas that it no longer covers in order to identify when and where to deploy its rapidly deployable units. Given MONUSCO’s mandated cooperation with the Congolese armed forces, humanitarians feel that sharing information may jeopardize humanitarian principles and may be in violation of the humanitarian community’s civilian-military guidelines if information were to be used to prompt military interventions. Aid workers report that there is only limited understanding between the humanitarian community and peacekeeping forces of their respective definitions of and approaches to protection. The Protection Cluster’s co-leads, UNHCR and the Norwegian Refugee Council, and MONUSCO’s Senior Management Group on Protection (SMGP), should work closely together to improve mutual understanding and enhance effective cooperation. They should foster better understandings of their respective approaches to protection and determine how they can share information that respects humanitarian principles and civilian-military guidelines. To do this effectively, humanitarians and peacekeepers alike must be educated about the importance of humanitarian principles and civilian-military guidelines as they pertain to the DRC.

Together, the Protection Cluster leads and the members of the SMGP should establish information sharing procedures that respect humanitarian principles and civilian-military guidelines. Years ago, protection matrices were used by humanitarians and MONUSCO to identify and prioritize key areas of protection concern. Although they are no longer used, the SMGP and Protection Cluster leads should determine if reintroducing an updated version of the matrices would be useful to improving cooperation. RI supports the Center for Civilians in Conflict’s 2017 recommendation that this should be considered, and that, “if revived, [the matrices] could allow humanitarians to share information on threats to civilians without disclosing confidential information on victim or witness identity.”

All agreements reached between the Protection Cluster leads and the SMGP should be formalized in a memorandum of understanding to be presented to the HCT. Once the HCT approves it, the language of the Protection Strategy should be amended to clarify the terms of cooperation and coordination between the humanitarian actors and MONUSCO.

CONCLUSION

The vast majority of humanitarian organizations working in the DRC are doing their best to provide for many complex needs with very limited resources. Yet the situation remains dire, and needs continue to spiral. When aid organizations are forced to divert resources from protracted crises to respond to a new catastrophe, the protracted crises become more entrenched and their consequences are even harder to address. If inadequate funding persists, humanitarian actors will not be in a position to mitigate the consequences as the situation deteriorates.

It is critical that donors acknowledge that underfunding means less provision and protection and, therefore, innocent lives lost. We cannot afford to wait for election results to significantly improve the international response; the time is now.

If Africa’s largest humanitarian crisis is not addressed, the consequences for the DRC could be catastrophic. We cannot continue to expect the humanitarian actors to perform miracles. These actors must be given the funds to effectively assess needs, coordinate, and respond without having to turn their backs on millions of Congolese in need.

The crisis in the DRC is once again at risk of metastasizing into a wider conflagration. It threatens to jeopardize any progress made during decades of international investment. Swift and concerted humanitarian action is required to protect this investment and alleviate the growing suffering of the Congolese people.

Refugees International Advocate Alexandra Lamarche traveled to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in June 2018.
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