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Member Charities Struggle to Maintain Lifelines to Embattled Democratic Republic of Congo Region

*Paul Lagasse
February 2008*

A decade of conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), in the North Kivu province, has resulted in an enormous humanitarian crisis. Fighting between local and foreign paramilitaries, the Congolese army and the United Nations' largest peacekeeping force has claimed an estimated 4–5 million lives in the last decade—a death toll greater than any war since World War II.

However, as devastating as the violence has been for the people trapped in the eastern province of Africa's third largest country, the situation has only recently received widespread international attention. Global Impact [member charities](#) have been working not only to help the civilian victims of the fighting, but also to raise awareness about their plight among lawmakers and the public at large.

Africa's First World War



Sylvia Plachy/Women for Women International

Jeannette, a Women for Women International program participant, pictured with her baby. Her

In the mid-1990s, the Rwandan genocide and fighting in Burundi destabilized much of central Africa, including Rwanda's neighbor Zaire (now DRC). A rebellion supported by Rwanda and Uganda touched off fighting that soon drew in Angola, Chad, Namibia, Sudan and Zimbabwe, as well as Congolese rebel groups.

The result has been called "Africa's first world war," and it devastated the resource-rich DRC. Today, 44 million people—80 percent of the population—live below the poverty line. Nearly half of DRC's population is under the age of 14, and life expectancy is currently less than 42 years.

Although the war officially ended in 2003, fighting between rebel groups, the Congolese army and UN troops sent in to enforce a 1999 ceasefire continued sporadically in North Kivu province. In late 2007, full-scale combat reignited, disrupting still-tenuous services and causing massive internal displacement of civilians into the forests, where they live without shelter, food and water or

hands were cut off by her rapist.

adequate medical care.

Displacement Increases Daily

Global Impact member charity **U.S. Fund for UNICEF** estimates that almost 1,200 people die every day in North Kivu from injuries and illness. To date, nearly 400,000 people have fled their homes to take shelter in churches, with host families, in refugee camps and even in the open forest—with thousands more taking to the roads every day as the fighting worsens.

Of the few who have chosen to remain, most are afraid to work their farms because of the risk of gunfire and artillery bombardment. However, shifting front lines frequently choke off their supplies and also prevent aid workers from reaching hospitals and field clinics where internally displaced persons (IDPs) gather to be treated for malnutrition, injuries and diseases such as measles and cholera.

Families travel at night to avoid detection, leaving children especially at risk of separation from their families. Aid organizations are reporting that children are increasingly being recruited and coerced by armed groups for use as forced labor and as child soldiers. Girls are routinely sexually exploited before eventually being released to wander in search of their families.

Systematic and Brutal Rape Used as a Tactic of War

In an epidemic that the *Los Angeles Times* has termed a “rape war,” an estimated 40,000 women and girls have been violently sexually assaulted and abused throughout North Kivu—a systematic campaign to terrorize and humiliate whole communities into submission. Global Impact member charity **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** reports that the tactics in this campaign are shifting away from isolated, furtive kidnappings from farms and water wells to brazen home break-ins by gangs of armed men who repeatedly rape women and girls at gunpoint, in front of their terrified families. Global Impact member charity **CARE** has called for the international community to declare this widespread use of rape as a tool of war a crime against humanity.

Global Impact Member Charities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Member charities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are providing badly needed aid to millions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other victims of the ongoing violence in the eastern regions of the country:

- **CARE:** CARE programs focus on health care for mothers and children, disease prevention, education, community and economic development, and advocacy on behalf of women and children. Its country offices in Uganda, Rwanda, DRC and Burundi have formed the Great Lakes Advocacy Group (GLAG) to address widespread sexual and gender-based violence in the countries bordering Africa’s Great Lakes. In the United States, CARE has been instrumental in lobbying for Congressional legislation in support of stabilization.

- **International Rescue Committee:** The IRC is providing a range of emergency aid services to the people of North Kivu, especially to victims of rape and sexual assault. IRC provides safe places for rape victims to recover, helps them reintegrate into their communities and find jobs, and provides legal assistance for victims seeking justice for the crimes committed upon them. IRC is also helping to rebuild hospitals and clinics and training volunteers to chlorinate local water supplies, which should help reduce potentially deadly diarrhea outbreaks.

- **United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR)** served as the delivery agency for a medical airlift to Kinshasa of medicines worth \$14 million. UMCOR has worked in the



Jiro Ose/IRC/DRC

Katanga region of DRC since 1999.

The IRC restored a vital train line in war-ravaged eastern Congo, enabling trade and transport of medicines and critical supplies throughout the region.

- **U.S. Fund for UNICEF:** UNICEF works with former child soldiers to help them return home instead of becoming re-recruited or turning to banditry. They provide training in useful skills and educational assistance and also badly needed medical attention including vaccinations, food, water and shelter. Unfortunately, the violence in North Kivu has prevented the return of child soldiers originally from there. **Women for Women International** has expanded its program in DR Congo to reach remote villages and has now served over 15,000 women since 2004. They provide financial and emotional assistance to women to help them move from crisis mode to self-sufficiency. Women for Women programs teach rights awareness so women can protect themselves and their families, and they teach them skills and show them how to start jobs and businesses.
- **World Relief:** World Relief's programs focus on reconciliation, AIDS prevention and care, and small business loans. Staffers work with local churches to develop reconciliation and rehabilitation programs that bring together people from many denominations and tribal groups. So far, they have helped over 8,000 families rebuild their homes. HIV/AIDS prevention and care programs have been started in churches, schools and clubs. World Relief's microfinance organization, Hekima, has provided affordable loans to nearly 3,000 clients.
- **World Vision:** Since 1996, World Vision EDRC (Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo) has been providing aid to victims of both the fighting and numerous natural disasters. Today, World Vision EDRC oversees projects in health and nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and care, aid to separated and abandoned children, IDPs, water and sanitation, and school construction and nutrition.


Caught in the crossfire and with few alternatives, the people of North Kivu rely on the tenuous lifeline offered by Global Impact member charities. [Your support](#) will help strengthen that lifeline. [PLEASE DONATE NOW >](#)

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