

COUNTRY PROFILE The Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the 3rd largest country in Africa. It is the largest in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) both in size and population. It has borders with 9 countries. Two civil wars and decades of poor governance have devastated the DRC and left its people desperately poor. War and neglect have resulted in the decay of the road and rail network, leaving the country without much-needed infrastructure. The mineral resources found within the country could make the country one of the most prosperous in the continent, and following the 2006 democratic elections, the first for 40 years, there is hope that the country can finally escape the cycle of conflict and suffering and realise its human potential, but also concern that continuing conflict and corruption will prevent this.

SUMMARY FACTS

Population: 64.3 Million (UN, 2008), UK: 61.2 million
Capital: Kinshasa
Area: 2,344,858 sq km (905,354 sq miles), UK: 243,610 sq km (94,060 sq miles)
Major languages: French, Lingala, Kiswahili, Kikongo, Tshiluba
Major religions: Christianity, Islam
Life expectancy at birth: 54 years (UN, 2008), UK: 79 years
Under-five mortality rate: 161 per 1,000 live births (UN, 2008), UK: 6 per 1,000 live births
HIV prevalence: 5.3% aged 15-49 (UN, 2007), UK: 0.2% aged 15-49
Adult Literacy Rate: 67% ages 15 and older (UN, 2008), UK: >99%

GDP per capita: US\$180 (UN, 2008), UK: US\$43,544.
Monetary unit: 1 Congolese franc = 100 centimes
Main exports: Diamonds, copper, coffee, cobalt, crude oil
CO2 emissions share of world total: 3.5%: UK: >2%
Population without access to an improved water source: 54% (UN, 2006), UK: 0%
Population using improved sanitation: 31% (UN, 2006), UK: 100%
Government: Alliance for the Presidential Majority, the main parties in which are: People's Party for Reconstruction and Democracy (PPRD) and Unified Lumumbist Party (ULP)
President: Joseph Kabila
Year Women received right to vote: 1947, 1961: UK: 1918, 1928 (equal rights)

Sources: UN Statistics, UNICEF (2009)



History

To independence in 1960

The sizeable area known today as the Democratic Republic of Congo is thought to have been populated at least 10,000 years ago, and was settled between the **5th and 8th centuries AD** by Bantu-speaking people from West Africa, who brought iron-working and new agricultural techniques to the region. The Bantu formed numerous kingdoms throughout the Congo River Basin and beyond, the most notable of which was the Kongo Empire. This highly developed kingdom stretched all the way to present-day Angola and was ruled by a patriarchal monarch.

The first European contact with the Kongo came through **15th century** Portuguese traders who soon began trading in goods such as ivory, cloth, pottery and ironware. Other than exotic stories carried home by these traders, little was heard of the Kongo in Europe until Dr David Livingstone, a Scottish missionary, began opening up the African interior to European exploration in the **1860s**. After Livingstone had been missing in Africa for more than five years, the New York Herald sent Welsh journalist Henry Morton Stanley to find him. Stanley's popular account of his search for the lost missionary prompted Britain's Daily Telegraph newspaper to send him to Africa again in **1874**, this time to undertake a difficult expedition: tracing the Congo River, the second longest watercourse in Africa, from source to sea.

Stanley's adventures along this river were seized upon by an unlikely colonist, King Leopold II of Belgium. Leopold believed that in order for his small nation to be considered alongside the great European powers, it would have to possess colonies. As a constitutional monarch, Leopold had little power to direct government policy and the government had no interest in acquiring expensive, unproductive colonies in equatorial Africa. Leopold chose to proceed without the support of the government and in **1878** he commissioned Stanley to go back to the Congo basin and in the next half a decade, Stanley persuaded more than 400 Congo chiefs to surrender their sovereignty to Leopold II.

At the **1884** Berlin conference, called by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck to divide Africa between the European powers, the Congo Free State was declared a free trade area and ceded to Leopold as a personal fiefdom.

The Congo's most abundant natural resource was latex, from wild rubber trees, and in **1888** John Dunlop had invented the pneumatic tire, thus dramatically increasing demand. Rubber traders working for The International African Society, marketed as a philanthropic organisation, committed atrocities against the local people in order to increase the quantity of latex harvested. Those villages that failed to meet their targets were looted and burnt, and villagers had their hands severed. The **1904** Casement Report on the gross abuses in the Congo Free State made Leopold's position as owner of an area 75 times the size of Belgium untenable. Despite protests from the king the Belgian government annexed the Congo Free State in **1908**, paying Leopold 50 million francs in compensation.

The Belgian government in Brussels had a paternalistic attitude towards its colony, and the result was the complete absence of any political infrastructure in the country. No representative body existed in the Belgian Congo until **1957**, which meant that until then nobody in the colony, white or black, had the opportunity to vote. However, the desire among Africans across the continent for independence that built throughout the 1950s did not fail to have an impact on the Congo.

In **1957** the first municipal elections were held in the colonial capital, Leopoldville. The Alliance of Ba-Kongo (ABAKO) party, representing the Bakongo ethnic group and led by Joseph Kasavubu, won the election. A year later, the young and charismatic politician Patrice Lumumba founded the Congo's first nationwide party,

the Congolese National Movement (MNC). Lumumba's organisation was broad-based and favoured a strongly centralized state, whereas Kasavubu and ABAKO envisioned a federal Congo in which the Bakongo would be semi-autonomous.

In **1959**, while in Brussels discussions were held to deliberate over the possibility of greater Congolese autonomy (although not independence), riots broke out in Leopoldville due to the banning of a registered political rally. Europeans were attacked and a brutal police response saw a number of Africans killed and wounded. The response from Brussels was, for the first time, to declare the intention of granting Congo full independence. Amid mounting violence in the colony the Belgian government invited 96 Congolese delegates to a conference in Brussels in **January 1960**. Among the delegates were Lumumba, Kasavubu and Moïse Tshombe, the head of a second ethnically-aligned party based in the mineral-rich Katanga province. Belgian officials suggested a four year transition to independence, but the Congolese delegates were unwilling to delay. Less than six months later, on **30 June 1960**, the "Belgian Congo" became an independent nation.

1960-1997

In the elections staged shortly before independence, Lumumba's MNC emerged as the biggest single party, with Kasavubu's ABAKO in second place. Tshombe's party won control of the Katangan provincial assembly. The MNC, despite victory, failed to gain an overall majority, and when neither main party managed to form a coalition, a compromise was reached whereby Kasavubu became president, and Lumumba prime minister and head of a coalition of diverse parties.

Just days after independence Congolese soldiers, angry that all the officers in the army remained white, began to cause unrest. Lumumba responded to this tension by dismissing all Belgian officers. The role of appointing Congolese replacements fell to the minister of defence, Joseph Mobutu. Without any effective chain of command, the army rioted, attacking the Belgian population.

The government rapidly lost control of the country, and on **July 11 1960** Tshombe took advantage of the collapse to declare independence for Katanga. Lumumba then asked for help from the Soviet Union, and Russian armaments and advisors arrived in the Congo in August. Kasavubu, angered by the arrival of the Russians, dismissed Lumumba. In retaliation, Lumumba declared Kasavubu to be deposed. Each called on Mobutu to arrest the other. That Lumumba had called on the Soviet Union had a decisive influence. The US, concerned about Soviet influence in the region, spread the Cold War to Congo through a CIA-sponsored coup led by Mobutu. In **February 1961** Mobutu returned the government to Kasavubu, shortly after Lumumba had been arrested and secretly executed.

Throughout this period Mobutu had been strengthening the Congolese army, and in **October 1965** he staged a second coup, dismissed Kasavubu and declared himself president for the next five years. He centralised power and formed his own party, the Popular Movement of the Revolution (MPR), which became the only permitted political party. This party was then 're-elected' in **1970**. During the first five years of his rule Mobutu embarked upon a programme of 'Africanisation'. The country was renamed Zaire and the capital, Leopoldville, became Kinshasa. Joseph Mobutu also gave the order for all citizens to adopt African names and the president himself took the name Mobutu Sese Seko Koko Ngbendu Wa Za Banga ('the all-powerful warrior who, because of endurance and an inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake').

Between **1970** and **1977** relative peace prevailed in Zaire. A measure of that stability is the successful staging of a heavyweight championship boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, the so called 'Rumble in the Jungle', in

Kinshasa in **October 1974**. However, in **1977** major incursions into Katanga by the Angola-based Congolese National Liberation Front (FLNC) caused thousands of casualties and Mobutu only regained control with the help of the US, Morocco and France.

Through the **1980s** Mobutu retained the support of western governments, particularly the US, despite presiding over an unprecedented decline in Zaire's economy. Mobutu ruthlessly exploited his country, enriching himself to the tune of more than US\$5 billion by taking state revenue and foreign loans. This form of rule came to be known as kleptocracy: 'rule by thieves'.

By **1990** the end of the Cold War had changed the international mood and both internal and external pressure forced some semblance of democracy upon Mobutu. The **1992** Sovereign National Conference, consisting of over 2,000 delegates from various political parties, elected opposition leader Etienne Kshisekedi as prime minister and a continuous power struggle between him and president Mobutu ensued.

In **1994**, amidst growing unrest, the World Bank closed its office in Kinshasa and declared Zaire bankrupt. In the east a million Hutu refugees fled into the country from neighbouring Rwanda after the ascension of a Tutsi-led government in response to the massacres there. By **1995** the refugee camps were controlled by Hutu militia using them as a base for incursions into Rwanda, which also led to attacks on Tutsi resident in Zaire. Mobutu sided with the Hutu, and all ethnic Tutsi were expelled from the army and civil service. This conflict, spilling over from Rwanda, was the catalyst that resulted in the end of Mobutu's thirty-two year rule. Enraged Tutsi found a politically and militarily capable leader in Laurent Kabila and in **1997**, supported by Rwandan and Ugandan forces, they began a civil war by swiftly marching on Kinshasa. In **May** of that year Kabila's troops entered the capital and Mobutu fled to Morocco, where he died of cancer four months later.

From 1997

Kabila assumed the office of president and took full executive and military powers, and changed the name of the country from Zaire back to the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Tutsi who had supported him quickly became dissatisfied with his rule and in **1998** they launched a new rebellion, backed by Rwanda, that developed into the DRC's second civil war. Kabila was able to get assistance from neighbouring states to combat the rebel offensive, and Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia provided troops and equipment for Kabila. The rebels withdrew to the east of the country, where they established de facto control over the region. In **1999** rebels backed by Uganda gained control over the north of the country. The Democratic Republic of Congo had de facto split into three provinces and the warring factions reached military deadlock.

A cease-fire was proposed In **July 1999** and all parties signed the Lusaka Accord, which called for a cease-fire, the removal of foreign troops, deployment of UN peacekeepers, and the launching of a transitional government leading to democratic elections. All parties were failing to implement the terms of the accord when, on **January 16 2001**, Laurent Kabila was assassinated. Kabila was succeeded by his son Joseph, who began reversing many of his father's policies. The number of UN peacekeepers was increased by late **2002** and Rwandan troops officially withdrew from the east of the Congo. An estimated 5 million people have died as a result of this war, making it the world's most lethal conflict since World War II.

A series of abortive negotiations had been undertaken throughout **2002** and eventually these led to an all-inclusive agreement between the conflicting parties, ratified in **April 2003**. A transitional government was formed and in **December 2005**

approximately two-thirds of eligible Congolese voted in a referendum to approve a new constitution, which came into force in **February 2006**. In **July 2006** the DRC held democratic multi-party elections. Voter turnout was high, at around 70 per cent, and despite logistical difficulties and sporadic incidences of violence, the elections were largely calm and free. The first round of presidential voting was inconclusive but in the second round, held in **October 2006**, Joseph Kabila beat rival Jean-Pierre Bemba with 58 per cent to 42 per cent. Kabila was inaugurated on **December 6 2006** for a five-year term.

The election of Kabila did not, however, bring an end to the violence in the north-east. Equally, the deployment of 17,000 international peacekeepers by the UN Mission to the Congo (MONUC) has been unable to stem the tide of violent conflict, partly due to MONUC's limited mandate and the impossibility of maintaining a presence everywhere that fighting takes place, and partly due to a reluctance to get involved even when civilians are attacked. Recent Security Council decisions to agree a more robust mandate for MONUC seem to have improved the situation, but the promised extra troops have yet to arrive.

An inclusive peace agreement (known as Amani Leo) was reached in **January 2008** that aimed to resolve continuing conflict in North and South Kivu provinces between the national army (FARDC), various nationalist militias and the Tutsi-dominated rebel group the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), led by General Laurent Nkunda. The agreement did not include former Rwandan Hutu militias (Interahamwe/ FDLR), who should have disarmed under the terms of the **2007 "Nairobi Protocol"** but continued to commit human rights abuses against innocent civilians.

Heavy fighting again broke out in **August 2008** between government troops and the CNDP, and following intense pressure from the international community the UN Security Council facilitated negotiations between the CNDP and the DRC government, but these were suspended when General Nkunda was detained in Rwanda. It seems that behind-the-scenes intervention by key European players convinced the presidents of the DRC and Rwanda that a joint operation against the FDLR (in line with the earlier Nairobi accords), and the integration of the CNDP into the DRC's national army, was a better strategy for addressing the underlying unresolved causes of conflict in Eastern DRC. Rwandan troops were invited into the DRC for a limited period of one month to assist in removing the FDLR threat. President Kabila's unilateral decision to invite them in provoked disapproval in parliament and more widely in nationalist Congolese circles.

The Rwandan army presence was replaced in **June 2009** by Operation Kimia II, in which the FARDC took over the lead role in pursuing the FDLR, with logistical support from MONUC. However some newly integrated militiamen (especially ex-CNDP) simply carried on with their attacks against civilians, using the anti-FDLR operation as an excuse, other FARDC commanders were caught selling arms to FDLR and allied nationalist militias, savage reprisal attacks were carried out against villages suspected of collaborating with the army (including new levels of rape – 7,000 women are estimated to have been victims in 2009), and the fear of violence drove 200,000+ persons in North and South Kivu provinces from their homes.

Neither military operation succeeded in driving the FDLR away from the mines where they continue to control the illicit trade in valuable minerals, often with tacit support from Congolese Hutu militias like the various "mai-mai" groups, corrupt army leaders and politicians, all of whom benefit from a continuing FDLR presence and have no interest in supporting peace initiatives. Faced with the failure of Kimia II to strike at the root causes of the conflict, MONUC and the international community abandoned it. Instead they reverted to a new version of Amani Leo, which continued to target the

return of rebels of Rwandan origin but placed the military responsibility firmly on the DRC government. MONUC was renamed the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission (MONUSCO) on July 1 2010 to reflect the change in approach.

Although the situation in the DRC has improved over the last decade, there is continuing concern that conflict in the mineral-rich north and east of DRC will again escalate, with the presence in close proximity of Hutu militias formed into the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), the CNDP, the DRC military, the Rwanda and Uganda military and the Lord's Resistance Army.

Population

The population of the DRC is currently estimated at between 64 and 70 million, 67 per cent of whom live in rural areas. Urban poverty is rife, with 76 per cent of urban residents living in slums. The rate of population growth in the DRC is one of the highest in the world, at 3.1 per cent per annum, compared with a global average of 1.2 per cent. In the DRC as many as 250 different ethnic groups have been distinguished, illustrating the arbitrariness of borders originally drafted at the 1884 Berlin Conference. 700 languages and dialects are spoken in the country, although this astonishing linguistic variety is bridged by the use of French, Kikongo, Lingala and Swahili. In terms of religious affiliation, 70 per cent of Congolese are Christian, predominantly Roman Catholic, and most of the remaining 30 per cent adhere to traditional religions.

The DRC is one of the lowest ranked countries in the world in the United Nations' Human Development Index, rated 176 out of 182 countries.

Politics

Power in the DRC is highly centralised, and executive power is vested in the President, currently Joseph Kabila of the People's Party for Reconstruction and Development (PPRD). Following the 2006 elections, two broad alliances emerged in the 500-seat National Assembly: the Alliance of the Presidential Majority (AMP), comprising 332 seats, and the opposition Union for the Nation (UpN), comprising 116 seats. The cabinet is appointed by the ruling party and the prime minister is elected by parliament. The DRC has a bicameral parliament consisting of a directly elected 500 member National Assembly and a Senate, the Senators of which are elected by provincial assemblies. Currently, the judiciary is only nominally independent and the President has the power to dismiss and appoint judges. Presidential and parliamentary elections are scheduled for September 4, 2011. Local elections have been postponed; they are now tentatively scheduled for late 2012.

The largest opposition party, the Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC), was thrown into disarray in May 2008 when its leader, Jean-Pierre Bemba, was arrested on suspicion of crimes against humanity and taken to The Hague. In December 2009 he was remanded in custody until his trial, due to commence at some point in 2010.

Economy

The DRC has the second largest land area in sub-Saharan Africa. It is rich in natural resources, has fertile soils, ample rainfall and considerable mineral resources. The mining of diamonds, gold, copper and cobalt has historically been the main source of export revenue for the country, and accounts for approximately 25 per cent of GDP. From 2006, after nearly two decades of violence that had disrupted the mining industry, production increased dramatically again and was responsible for some of the best annual growth rates in Africa (6.3 per cent in 2007 and 6.2 per cent in 2008). However, renewed violence in the north and east, combined with the global recession has had a serious affect on growth, reducing it to just 2.7 per cent in 2009. Although the wealth generation potential of the DRC is huge, companies have been

and remain reluctant to invest due to the ever-present danger of armed conflict in the country. The ad-hoc, poorly co-ordinated infrastructure of the country has also discouraged investment and retarded economic development.

Despite the vast mineral and agricultural wealth of the DRC, which provide it with the potential to be one of the most successful economies in Africa, the majority of the population remain desperately poor, with a GDP per capita of just US\$180. Much economic activity occurs in the informal sector.

Civil society and trade unions

Although not as powerful as that in South Africa, the trade union movement in the Democratic Republic of Congo is an active part of society. The largest of the unions is the National Union of Congolese Workers (UNTC). The UNTC focuses much of its attention on three areas: HIV/AIDS prevention, supporting informal sector workers and the protection of women in employment. They have trained around 400 of their members to act as peer educators in their workplaces. These peer educators use their lunch breaks to raise awareness of prevention issues with their colleagues and combat stigmatisation of those who suffer from HIV/AIDS. The vast majority of Congolese citizens are involved in the informal sector in some way. Due to the lack of clear rules and employment contracts problems with the authorities are common, but many can be avoided by unionising. The UNTC has also created a mutual health fund to help informal workers pay for medical care for them and their families. Women's committees are set up in every company in which the UNTC is represented and these help channel female-specific problems, especially maternity-related issues, for discussion with employers. The UNTC also provides education about birth spacing and reproductive health.

Trade unionists in the DRC do face significant abuses of their human rights, most notably in the form of arbitrary arrest and judicial harassment. One widely reported incident occurred in January 2009, when three trade unionists were arrested and tortured after signing a memorandum that denounced the misappropriation of public funds by the Ministry of the National Economy and Trade.

A limited capacity on the part of the state to respond to the country's staggering governance challenges, coupled with donor pressure, has served as catalyst to the growth of the civil society sector, with thousands of local and international NGOs emerging over the past decade to provide critical services in place of the state.

In the aftermath of the 1998-2002 civil war in the DRC, the International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) has built the capacity of civil-society to document and archive past human rights violations. Such a process is important for those affected; if violations remain unacknowledged any attempts at achieving peace and reconciliation are likely to stall.

Another international organisation, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), has also been working to strengthen civil society in the DRC. Due to a lack of education, as well as poor infrastructure, civil society mobilisation has been difficult in the country, so educating and building the capacity of indigenous civil society actors is vital. The IFES' Voter Opinion and Involvement through Civic Education (VOICE) project has sought to enable Congolese citizens to better understand and engage in democratic processes in order to hold the government to account, particularly concerning the problem of corruption.

Achievements

1. Democratic elections: despite voter registration irregularities and allegations of vote buying, the 2006 National Assembly elections marked a significant departure from 40 years of authoritarian rule. Considering the logistical challenges of holding an

election in a country like the DRC, a voter turnout of around 70 per cent is a remarkable achievement.

2. Economic growth: since the present administration took over, growth in the DRC has been strong, at over 6 per cent in 2007 and 2008. Even during the global economic downturn the country has maintained a positive growth rate of 2.7 per cent in 2009, a year in which many of the world's major economies have seen negative growth.

Development Challenges

1. Regional instability: despite the progress made since the Lusaka peace accord in 1999, conflict continues to devastate the country's northern and eastern regions. Although further peace agreements in 2009 aimed at encouraging armed groups to disarm and form legitimate political parties have been a positive step forward, the lack of infrastructure and state institutions in the northeast have meant that warlords still control large parts of the region. Until the DRC is stable and unified it will remain difficult to provide public services and encourage investment in much of the country.

2. Infrastructure building: as already highlighted, for a country the size of the DRC coherent infrastructure – including rail, road and telephone networks – is vital for both economic and human development. The DRC currently has only 2,000km of usable, paved roads. That is equivalent to only 0.5 per cent of the UK road network in a country nearly ten times the size of the UK.

3. Consolidation of democracy: although the 2006 elections were a step forward there is still along way to go in ensuring democracy becomes entrenched in the DRC. Opposition parties face arrest and imprisonment, for instance Gabriel Mokia of the Congolese Democratic Party was imprisoned in April 2009 after criticizing the government during a televised debate. Unless the opposition are allowed to speak freely, the DRC's highly centralised system can have no more than the formalities of democratic governance. Also, until all conflicting groups come to view democratic participation as the only legitimate method of effecting change in the country the danger of coups or authoritarian regimes will remain present.

4. Corruption: According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, the DRC is the most corrupt country in southern Africa and is ranked at 162 out of 180 countries in the world (the lower a country is on the list, the higher its level of corruption). Transparent governance is a prerequisite for justice in a country, so reducing corruption must be a priority.

5. Freedom of speech: Although guaranteed by the constitution, freedoms of speech and expression are limited. Independent journalists are frequently threatened, arrested, and attacked, and have occasionally been killed.

6. The judicial system: the constitution theoretically guarantees judicial independence. However, in reality the judiciary remains subject to manipulation, and the courts lack both trained personnel and resources. In July 2009 President Kabila dismissed 165 prosecutors and magistrates and his role in the replacement process has been a source of concern. Prison conditions are also considered appalling, and pre-trial detention is common.

7. Women's rights: regardless of constitutional guarantees of equality, women still face discrimination, particularly those women living in rural areas where there is little government presence. Violence against women has increased since fighting began in 1994, particular rape and sexual slavery. The trade unions in the DRC are working to combat discrimination in the workplace, but there is still a long way to go before gender equality becomes a reality.

For more information on the Democratic Republic of Congo, visit the following websites:

- Official website of the office of the President www.presidentrdc.cd
- DFID's DR of Congo page <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/where-we-work/africa-west--central/congo-democratic-republic/>
- The five 'work sites' of the DRC <http://www.cinqchantiers-rdc.com/English/home.php>
- Freedom House 'Countries at the Crossroads 2010' report on the DRC <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=140&edition=9&ccrpage=43&ccrcountry=181>
- UN's official MONUSCU site <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/monusco/>