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Mr. Michael Levitt

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● (1305)

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC)): Welcome, colleagues, the 109th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today we begin our study hearing testimony in regard to the human rights situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Our first witness is Yolande Bouka, who is a postdoctoral fellow at the Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy at the University of Denver.

Ms. Bouka, if you would like to go ahead, we've allotted 10 minutes for your opening remarks.

Dr. Yolande Bouka (Postdoctoral Fellow, Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy, University of Denver, As an Individual): Good afternoon, everyone. All protocols observed. Thank you for having me today.

In addition to the introduction, I'm also a Canadian-based colour and policy analyst, and I will be a visiting assistant professor at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University this coming fall. I also happen to be the co-director of the Rift Valley Institute's Great Lakes region course, which discusses some of these issues in Rwanda, Burundi, the DRC, and Uganda. The course starts in the first week of June, so if anyone is interested, I invite you to enrol.

I used to work for the Institute for Security Studies, a think tank based in South Africa that looks into human security across sub-Saharan Africa, and I was the lead researcher for the Great Lakes region in the Nairobi office.

We are now about six or seven months away from the 2018 presidential, legislative, and provincial elections that are supposed to be taking place at the end of this year, in December. They are supposed to take place two years later than they were initially slotted. President Kabila's term was supposed to end officially in December of 2016, but citing issues with finances, resources, and security, he decided to stay. For most analysts who followed the region before that, this is something that we expected. We kept talking about a slippage of constitutional mandates. Unlike President Kagame in Rwanda, where it was quite easy to change the constitution, President Kabila understood that he was not in a position to bring together a coalition of politicians who would be willing to back amending the constitution.

The DRC has long been a country that has had instability, particularly since the fall of Mobutu, when we saw the collapse of order—not law and order but simply order—the proliferation of armed groups, waves of displacement across the region, and an increased vulnerability of the population.

As for many countries on the continent in the sub-region, election season is often accompanied by tensions, and weak governance and institutions facilitate the return of violence. In the case of the DRC, Kabila's refusal to step down and to hold elections as scheduled has led to tensions, protests, and a resurgence of armed mobilization.

At the moment, 5,500 people per day are displaced on average due to various sources of insecurity in the country, and I'll talk a little bit more about them.

There are approximately half a million refugees in the DRC from other countries in the region, including Burundi, and you also have a wave that goes the other way, with Congolese fleeing to Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda, because of insecurity.

According to the UN, the DRC is currently a category 3 humanitarian situation. There are only three other countries that are in the same category—Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. There are full-blown wars in those three countries and not DRC, just to give you a sense of the scale of what is taking place there.

There are about 13 million Congolese who are vulnerable to the violence but also to what happens once they're displaced, food insecurity and so forth.

I'd like to identify three nodes of human rights concerns in the DRC at the moment. First is the government's response to protests.

The government has banned protests across the country, and this is in violation of their responsibility with regard to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, for instance, or even UN documents. They keep saying officially that protestors and civil society organizations have the right to protest, but in reality, when protests actually take place in various parts of the country, local authorities, the police and so forth, get involved and try to stop protests quite violently.

Who's involved in the crackdown of protests? Well, you have various branches of the security sector. You have the police, intelligence services, the presidential guards, and the army. In some cases, Human Rights Watch has reported that former M23 members were also recruited from Uganda and Rwanda to return to the DRC to participate in the repression of protests in the DRC.

● (1310)

If you're looking to try to figure out who you should identify as the source of human rights violations, you're going to want to look at these various branches of the security sector. When they crack down on protests, they arrest people and harass people, but they also kill people in quite large numbers.

If you follow the DRC closely, you'll know that January 2015 was one of the first times when we had mass protests in the streets in Kinshasa. Most of the instability in the past decade and a half or 20 years has been in the eastern Congo. This is the part in which we used to see a lot of violence, but that has changed. The fact that there are numerous protests in Kinshasa for the first time since Mobutu fell is something that people should be concerned about. The government is not sure how to respond to them and therefore it responds with violence.

Of course, the second note I want to talk about is the resurgence of armed rebellions and the proliferation of armed groups, not only in eastern Congo but also in regions such as the Kasai, which was usually relatively calm compared to the eastern Congo. That has a lot to do with Kabila's refusal to step down. A lot of these groups have been politicized, taking sides on whether they are siding with Kabila or against Kabila, and they have discourses arguing that Kabila is not the legitimate president in Kinshasa and that that is why they're rebelling.

Of course, there's also frustration with local authority. I think it's important to look at the multiple dynamics of why these armed groups are operating. There are economic reasons, obviously. There are frustrations with Kinshasa, but there are also a lot of frustrations that are locally based, and understanding the relationship between local governance and these armed groups is quite important.

There are many regions that it is important to take note of. In the northeastern part of the DRC is Beni, where you've had the ADF, a Ugandan-based rebel group that has found refuge or is now operating in the northern part of the DRC. They're engaged in confrontations with the FARDC and also with the UN forces.

There is the Kasai region, where they've had a rebellion since last year, mostly due to one of their leaders being assassinated by government forces. While the initial rebellion was a little more organized in the first few months, since the assassination of the rebel leader, the group has fragmented and actually has been one of the major sources of displacement in the country.

There is Uvira, and one of the reasons there is more violence in Uvira goes to my third point. There are regional dynamics of instability in the Great Lakes region in general. As most of you know, Burundi has had instability since 2014 and mostly 2015. President Nkurunziza's refusal to step down as President of Burundi and to run for an additional term has led to instability and the emergence of armed groups RED-Tabara and Forebu, which are now operating out of eastern Congo in the Uvira region. That has created instability for a variety of reasons. The first one is the fact that Burundian forces and FARDC are involved in covert operations in the region to try to suppress the rebellion and the fact that because these armed groups have difficulties returning to Burundi, they are now involved in looting, in banditry activities in the region, and also in trying to find alliances with other armed groups in the region.

When you look at these three nodes of instability, you realize that it is quite difficult to pinpoint what the human rights conditions are in the DRC. There are various sources, but with the electoral process, you're likely to see more violence and more instability. People are going to take opportunities to claim political agendas, and with that comes an increase in displacement. People don't necessarily die of armed violence, but there are consequences of displacements once they are displaced.

I will leave it at that, and I'm open to questions.

● (1315)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Thank you very much, Madam Bouka.

Now we go to Mr. Reid for seven minutes.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

With regard to displaced persons, I'd really like to get my head around that. Given the huge numbers, it strikes me that this is where the primary humanitarian crisis lies. You mentioned that there are 5,500 people displaced daily. Should we interpret that as meaning 5,500 more people will be displaced tomorrow versus today, or are some people able to return home, thereby offsetting that number?

Dr. Yolande Bouka: It's difficult to tell. I get the numbers from ISS and the UN.

The country is big. People will return home. I think you should take that as an average of the number of people who end up moving, who are displaced from one place to another, and who go back home. However, what often happens is that what you call “home” is sometimes a place you have been for only two years as a result of previous violence. As well, what happens is that people who settle in temporary or informal settlements have to be relocated to another place as they follow the different patterns of violence.

I wouldn't be able to tell you directly if you should assume that some people are returning home in that 5,000 or if it's new displacement, but whatever the type of displacement, it means that if people develop networks for 6 to 12 months, even if they are not home, they've found a way to get food, some sort of security, and some sort of permanence. This uprooting, particularly if it's caused by violence or insecurity, is a challenge even if they return home. Returning home often means finding somebody occupying your land and your house and trying to recreate those networks.

Mr. Scott Reid: Effectively, then, in some situations you can't return home—or to wherever the previous place was—without displacing somebody else. You have effectively a game of musical chairs in which there are more people than there are places for them. That's very crude, but does that essentially describe the situation?

Dr. Yolande Bouka: You would find there are more people than places in countries like Rwanda and Burundi, where land is very scarce. However, in the case of eastern Congo, you do have land conflicts. If you are gone for a couple of years, in some cases people will leave a male behind to continue with agricultural activities, but if you have completely abandoned your property, somebody will come in, and that's where you become displaced. It doesn't necessarily mean that this person you displace when you come home doesn't have a place to stay, but there will be issues with claims of ownership.

Land disputes are prevalent across the region, particularly with regard to getting land titles. People don't necessarily have the titles, so it can be difficult to prove that the land belongs to you. Depending on how long you've been gone, this can definitely be an issue.

Mr. Scott Reid: I was in another country, Eritrea, where I had a chance to chat with people who were explaining to me how they deal with land use. The traditional patterns have held up much better there, despite the horrible war they went through with Ethiopia a few decades back.

As far as I can see, the issues relate to land in some cases being useful at one time of the year but not at other times of the year, so that you have mutual rights and effectively what we would think of in our law as rights-of-way. All of these things are negotiated orally and retained in a non-written form, which is quite robust, but it's only robust as long as you're at peace with your neighbours and you don't have some outside authority driving people away. I think the destruction of that would have been very damaging there.

Does that describe a little bit of what's happening, or is it totally different?

Dr. Yolande Bouka: It's quite different. What you have is communities trying to gain control of territory, and I wish I had a map. I can share that with the committee at a later time. There's a wonderful map that has been put together by the Congo Research Group. What they show is control of territory of armed groups and then sometimes the responses by local defence groups. There are claims about who the land belongs to. If a particular group manages to get the upper hand and you fall victim to displacement, it's not about trying to negotiate using the land for part of the year. There are claims that 100 years ago your people came from Burundi and Rwanda and they've managed to reclaim that particular territory.

When you have these types of dynamics, it's quite difficult to negotiate co-ownership of the land. In that particular region, these negotiations don't really take place. In addition, there's the fact that part of these local defences and these armed groups are benefiting from the land itself. They often want to settle and use that land to sustain their fighters.

● (1320)

Mr. Scott Reid: Very briefly, as an historian I always look to analogies from other situations. There are a number of cases where a military group effectively is divorced from the land where it started out. A great example from central Africa is the German army under Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and his Askaris in the First World War, who were chased off of German East Africa. I think they were actually in what is now the Congo for part of the time, living off the land as a way of sustaining themselves as a fighting force. From the point of view of the local population, though, that was a humanitarian disaster. Is that roughly analogous to the behaviour of some of these groups?

Dr. Yolande Bouka: It is for some of these groups—a group like the FDLR, for instance, which originates from Rwanda. The FDLR's origins and dynamics and size are quite disputed, but they are perceived as a foreign force. They will try to integrate and gain control over certain communities. They've changed location and they've changed their governing styles over the past 20 years. Depending on the relationship they have with local groups, sometimes they are able to integrate those groups and integrate their communities quite harmoniously, particularly if they share the same ethnic groups.

In other cases, it's not the case. You do have some of these groups that are not indigenous to the region. RED-Tabara, for instance, comes from Burundi. They have to negotiate their space, not only with the local population but also with the other armed groups. And when we talked about “armed groups”, it's very loosely defined. Some of them are groups of 50 fighters. Others are a couple of thousand. Those dynamics are also important to take into consideration.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Mr. Fragiskatos, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you for being here today.

I want to cite for you what Human Rights Watch said about the devastation of this conflict. They called it “the world’s deadliest since World War II”, and said that six million people have died over “conflict-related causes” over the past two decades. That is a difficult number, to say the least, to process.

When they say that six million people have died due to conflict-related causes, what does that mean, exactly? What does that entail?

Dr. Yolande Bouka: You often talk about death in excess of violence. You have people who fall victim to massacres or who are killed in crossfire. But when you talk about in excess or conflict-related causes, you often talk about the fact that you're displaced, meaning that you're malnourished and you're vulnerable to diseases. All these things are involved in that definition of “conflict-related causes”. They're not displaced because of a famine. They're not displaced because of a drought. They're displaced because there are armed groups in their region that make them and their family vulnerable. They have to go somewhere else.

I'm based in Toronto. If I had to move today, I would just go to Montreal. My family is there. I have a little bit of family everywhere. In a lot of these places, their families and communities, particularly in rural areas, are right there. They have to move all together. Where do you go? You can't necessarily call someone and say, “Hey, I'm going to take to the road with my family and come and crash with you for a few days.” Oftentimes you pack whatever you have. You don't have the networks and resources to be appropriately housed or nourished. That puts people at great risk of vulnerability. Oftentimes it's the opportunistic diseases that are developed in refugee camps or makeshift informal settlements and so forth.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Whenever we've had witnesses come and testify about a conflict that brings about enormous human rights consequences and suffering, whether it's in sub-Saharan Africa or elsewhere, there's this whole point about the fragmentation of authority within a state. There is a central government, at least on paper. In addition to the central government, you have a number of local actors who in many ways act as if they are a state. In fact, they form the same sorts of structures, their own security forces, and their own leadership dictating what those security forces do, ordering them to carry out all sorts of brutal assaults against a local population in order to maintain authority.

Can you speak about the extent of this phenomenon in the Congo and how it's exacerbated the conflict? I ask that question with this is mind. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, there are 70 armed groups, or more than that, operating in eastern Congo alone. I know you mentioned that Kinshasa has now come into play. I mean, you can answer the question however you like, but I'm talking about that figure itself, which you say is actually an underestimation. Can you speak about the importance of that and about looking at the conflict through that lens?

● (1325)

Dr. Yolande Bouka: Absolutely. Actually, since Kabila's refusal to leave office, it's gone from approximately 70 armed groups all the way to about 120. If you want a good source, there's the Kivu security tracker, an organization that is monitoring the security situation in the Kivus.

I agree with you, and for a variety of reasons. Some of these groups are remnants of groups that emerged in the 1990s following Rwanda's invasion of the DRC and emerged in the sense of a need to defend themselves from invaders. What's happened now is that it's become an economy. Being a fighter has become an economy, first, because during the 1990s and early 2000s, when they started negotiating, if you were in an armed group you had the potential of being integrated into the FARDC, the national army. For many of these groups, it became an imperative to swell their numbers in order to be considered an important player in the second Congo war.

However, you also had the fact that Kinshasa has always been very detached from eastern Congo. Mobutu had no interest in having a road that connects Kinshasa all the way to Goma. He wanted to maintain Kinshasa, and whatever was going on in eastern Congo was not really his priority. Subsequent governments have done very similar things, maintaining at arm's length whatever is going on in eastern Congo. That has led a lot of the local population to feel they have to turn to the local leaders. A lot of these local leaders who have ties to Kinshasa, unfortunately or fortunately, also have ties to mining companies, are trying to get their hands on mining concessions to make money on the side, and use armed groups sometimes to secure their financial interests, to gain territory from other people. These networks of governance at the local level are quite important. At one point you have some armed groups who will ally themselves for a particular purpose, to gain a particular political agenda, and that political alliance six months later is null and void, and these groups have realigned themselves with other politician-related armed groups.

It's something that is very, very important to note. In fact, if you followed what happened in the Kasai, with the assassination of two UN investigators, you would know that the investigation by RFI and other people who went to see what happened revealed their assassination was paid for by some of these local government people, who did not want the UN and westerners to know exactly what was going on. Often we point the finger at Kinshasa for some of this violence. Kinshasa has no interest in really securing the region, and it is to blame for a lot of the security concerns, but a lot of the root causes of these security dynamics are actually regionally born.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): You have about 30 seconds.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: With 30 seconds, I wonder if you could integrate a response into any question that touches on what I'm about to ask. You don't have to answer it now.

What does this conflict actually boil down to? I'm hearing concerns about corruption, populations feeling alienated from the central government, problems with the rule of law. If you could get into the real drivers of the conflict, either with other colleagues who might ask you a question in that direction or through something in addition to what you've presented here today, that would be very helpful.

● (1330)

Dr. Yolande Bouka: Okay.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Go ahead and answer that question. I'll just adopt it as the “any time—

Dr. Yolande Bouka: That's a really hard question to answer.

If you look at a lot of the reports issued by various organizations monitoring this situation, you will notice that they tell you there are various recommendations. There is an issue of governance and rule of law.

One the biggest problems in the DR Congo, I think, is this ongoing impunity. Now, you have impunity on a variety of levels. The first one, of course, was during the first and second Congo wars. People were not held accountable for the massacres they engaged in or for the humanitarian law violations they engaged in among themselves. Instead, in order to promote peace, what they ended up doing was integrating militias into a national army. That became almost a reward: you fight; you are willing to negotiate; we integrate you.

Within the very army of the DR Congo, you have thousands of people who are war criminals, who have been rewarded with government positions in order to maintain the peace. This is one of the challenges. What that does is it corrupts the professionalism of the army, even though it wasn't great to begin with following the fall of Mobutu.

It also brings a mentality in the minds of other armed groups that if maybe they engage in similar practices, they will also be rewarded in the same way.

The second part is that people don't trust the government to respond to their security and social needs, so they look to local authorities for the provision of these services, and that leads to a decentralization of authority. If it's done in order to develop a federal system, that's one thing. But the process is very ad hoc. They say, “Look, the federal government is not providing us with security. They're sending the military to Beni and they're not sending anyone here. We will then create our local militias to protect ourselves.”

A lot of times, these local groups are developed with the intent of protecting themselves and protecting their communities, but then you have to feed them, provide weapons for them. The illicit networks in which these people engage, in order to be able to protect themselves, then also bring in other dynamics of being involved with people who are not so benevolent in their intentions.

There's a regional context in which the DRC finds itself. Kasai and Kinshasa aside, the Kivu region is also a place where countries like Rwanda are benefiting from the instability for economic purposes. For a very long time, the Rwandan government was fomenting dissent in the region to enable them to go in and exploit mineral resources in the region. Now that they've been called out and have had some sanctions against them, they use other means to continue.

Just recently, there was a confrontation between the Rwandan government and Congolese forces in the Virunga region. If you follow the region, you'll know that Virunga park has become a place where people are getting kidnapped. Kidnapping is a great source of revenue for armed groups in trying to get control over the region. There's a dispute between the two countries.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Ms. Hardcastle needs to go, but that was too good a question to leave sitting so....

Dr. Yolande Bouka: I could go on and on.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Yes, and you can.

I guess my question was surrounding the drivers of conflict. I think that if you had kept talking, you probably would have got to these, too.

I'm wondering about who benefits from sowing conflict in these regions. I don't know if there are these local groups.... Should we be thinking of places like Rwanda and Uganda, and corporate interests?

You can just keep going. Use my time and riff on that a bit.

Dr. Yolande Bouka: If you put together this idea that countries in the region are not hallmarks of democracy and good governance—accepting that Rwanda is a slightly different space—you have an opportunity to gain economically out of the chaos. That's what happened in the early 2000s with Uganda and Rwanda.

In fact, if you follow what's going on right now between the two countries, the seeds of the current tensions between Rwanda and Uganda go back to the second Congo war, when there were disputes about where they were going, who they were aligning with, and which part of the territory they wanted to gain control over.

I'm not sure of the extent to which countries in the region really benefit clearly from the suffering that's happening in the DRC, but I know the great distraction of the international community in focusing on the DRC and countries like Burundi has allowed Rwanda to be perceived as a source of stability in the region, despite the fact that effectively it is not.

Mining companies may benefit, perhaps. Loose governance benefits people who don't have to pay taxes and who are not accountable to local and national authority. Ultimately, out of the chaos, people find opportunities. A lot of these dynamics are local. People are realizing they can benefit.

Even in the army, the AFDRC, colonels and others who are highly ranked in the military benefit from stealing weapons from the army and selling them to rebels. There is very little supervision. A lot of people are benefiting from the chaos. The people who aren't, unfortunately, are the citizens. They are vulnerable, not just to armed violence but also to all of the displacement and what happens after that.

It's really hard to answer both of your questions: who exactly is instigating the violence, and who benefits the most? Ultimately a lot of people benefit.

I'm not sure of the extent to which regional organizations have a role to play, because I think this a point people are not focusing on enough. The African Union has a responsibility to get involved. The problem with the African Union is that it often delegates the responsibility to regional organizations like the East African Community, the ICGLR, and so forth, to mediate the situation.

When the African Union sent Edem Kodjo, a Togolese diplomat, a lot of people asked questions. Edem Kodjo has very close ties with the Kabila government, so why would they send this guy to mediate?

You see that the internal politics in regional organizations make it very difficult to take the situation seriously and to impose regional sanctions. That's a challenge. The international community—countries like Canada, the U.S., and even the European Union—will rely on the African Union, and the African Union relies on regional organizations.

If they rely on ECOWAS in west Africa, they're more likely to have success than if they rely on the EAC or the ICGLR, because they're not really interested in intervening or getting in each other's way in the region. That's another challenge. It's not really an organization that benefits, but it's an organization that should be held responsible for what's happening as well.

● (1335)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: With this election coming up in December—if, as you say, it actually happens—where would you see the potential for positive influence in having this be a meaningful election? Would that be more of a regional role, an African Union role, or do you think it would be more local?

Dr. Yolande Bouka: Because the elections are a national exercise, the government and the international community have to be involved in the process to make sure that people trust it. There's very little trust between Kinshasa and the regions or among political elites. Surveys show that people are very enthusiastic about the prospect of having elections, but they are not quite sure whether the results will be respected.

They're not sure they will take place, because the electoral commission has set the date, but there is a long list of potential reasons the elections will not take place, and the security situation is one of them. Those who benefit from the violence are those who don't want to have elections because the security situation makes it too difficult to have them.

Looking at the process, we see that voter registration has started. The DRC hasn't had a census in over 30 years, so they don't actually know how many people live in the various regions and therefore don't know how many people they should have registered. This was one of the conditions that was talked about in 2016, and they still haven't had a census. Part of this has to do with the opposition's saying, "We can't possibly wait for a census before we have an election; it's going to take too long", and then the government's saying, "We don't have the resources to do it."

One way to build confidence is by monitoring how many people are registered, monitoring what's happening, how they vote. There has been a dispute about whether to use electronic devices to do the elections or ballots. As someone who monitored elections in Kenya, I can tell you that electronic devices are not the cure-all for trust in elections, particularly in a context in which people believe that the particular electronic system employed will be used to rig the process.

Also important is sending monitors very early, at the registration process. This is the biggest weakness of electoral monitoring across sub-Saharan Africa—and Latin America, as we've seen recently. People don't get there early enough to make sure that the institutions that are put in place a few months ahead of the elections are transparent and that once a result comes out, people actually trust these institutions.

I think this could be a way in which you regain trust. Once you regain trust, some of the armed groups who are using the political situation to say they don't believe this is a legitimate government may return home to the barracks and lay down their weapons. That would be one way in which you can use the elections as a way to promote peace. These methods would be partial, unless you address a lot of other issues in eastern Congo and the Kasai.

● (1340)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): We move on to Mr. Tabbara for five minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. If there's some remaining time, I'd like to pass it over to my colleague.

Thank you very much for coming in.

I want to go along the lines of my colleague in talking about the drivers of conflict.

I'm looking at the overall situation and how we can bring to an end many of the human rights abuses. I'm seeing that, as you mentioned in your testimony and some of your answers, after the first and second war there was impunity, and not many officials have been held accountable. They're using their resources and their efforts to stay in power.

Arguably, Congo would be one of the richest countries, rich with a lot of minerals and resources—cobalt, diamonds, gold, etc. Now there are around 20,000 peacekeeping troops deployed there. They're putting in a lot of measures to sustain peace, but is there something the international community can do—any type of bilateral negotiations, or speaking with officials to say that if these human rights abuses continue and are ongoing, we're going to stop the supply of the minerals? Maybe I'm a little bit naive, but would this not put pressure on a lot of the governing forces? It seems that they're fuelling their power through all this wealth of resources.

Dr. Yolande Bouka: In an ideal world, yes. A lot of these resources are not only used by government or people in power but also the informal mining, for instance, is both used by ordinary people to feed their families but it's also used by armed groups who gain control over mining sites to gain resources to pay for weapons and their soldiers and so forth.

In the large scheme of things, it has been difficult to put in some of these sanctions because some of the countries in the west have companies with a vested interest in being able to extract resources.

I'm not saying it's impossible, but it would be very difficult to impose rules on any mining company, whether Canadian or American or Swiss, to say they are not respecting human rights, therefore they are no longer allowed to operate in the country until the situation is normalized. It would definitely have an impact on the political elites' desire to restore some sort of order, but then the question is what are the laws within each of these countries or regional economic blocs with regard to how they are to interact with their own companies.

I think Glencore is a Canadian mining company. How do you then tell them they're no longer allowed to operate there, not because it's not benefiting you, but because from a human rights perspective, we don't want you to do business in DR Congo?

That's where some of the challenges come. It goes beyond simply saying we're imposing sanctions on Kabila and his family and freezing his assets, but we're saying you will be sanctioned if you operate in DR Congo. It's a little like what people are doing or want to do in Iran now.

I don't know if you have the economic or political will across the global north to disengage economically from the political elite in DR Congo. Would that make a difference? I think it would because let's remember, a handful of people end up benefiting from these backdoor deals between themselves and some of our mining companies. I'm just not sure if there's a political will to engage that way with those private institutions and private companies that we have at home and in Europe.

● (1345)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: How much time do we have left?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): You have about 30 seconds left but if you want to go ahead, we'll just switch it up. I have some questions, and you're the next round.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I don't think I have enough for 30 seconds. Go ahead.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Okay.

I wanted to ask you about the environment because you mentioned many of these situations where these armed groups begin, at least, as local protection so they're not "expeditionary forces". What is it like for NGOs to try to deliver aid right now? Are there some areas where they are successful and other areas where it's a life-and-death situation for them to be able to help these displaced people?

Dr. Yolande Bouka: Absolutely. I wouldn't have the know-how to tell you exactly which regions are difficult and which ones aren't. I remember in 2017, at the height of the violence in Kasai region, people couldn't get in to get water and food to the displaced people because the situation was so tense and after the UN investigators were killed, NGOs decided to be a little more concerned.

For a very long time, there was this sense that if you were a humanitarian organization, a UN organization, and even a western researcher in general with white skin, you could navigate this space because you would not be seen as a target. That has changed dramatically in the past year, starting, I think, to a certain extent with the assassination of the two UN investigators, which has made a lot of humanitarian organizations rethink the safety of their employees.

The last thing you want to see in the Congo is what you saw in South Sudan where humanitarian workers ended up being targeted for food and water and medicine, which resulted in the death of a lot of humanitarian workers. I know for a fact that in some places it's been difficult. A lot of these organizations operate out of Goma and they assess the security situation depending on how things change. Sometimes you have operations in Beni, sometimes you don't. When the military pulls out of Beni, things calm down and that may be seen as an opportunity to go.

It's definitely affected the way in which NGOs and humanitarian organizations respond; where they're willing to go. The safety of international aid workers and international organization employees has changed tremendously in the past 12 months. It's leading them to recalculate where they send people, where they do not. Unfortunately, the delay in that thinking and cost-benefit analysis makes people even more vulnerable.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Are child soldiers part of the human damage there as well?

Dr. Yolande Bouka: Yes, with some groups, absolutely.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Do some groups recruit more than others?

Dr. Yolande Bouka: Yes. In the Kasai, it is prevalent. People have documented young people, young boys, being recruited. It's one of the gendered dimensions of this conflict that a lot of young boys are being taken and forcibly recruited to engage in these groups. Sometimes it's not so forcibly; sometimes some of them just want to join as well, definitely, but not all of them, and I think that's important to know.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): We did a study some years ago in regard to the psychological effect on children of the Rwandan genocide, and I wonder if we're seeing a migration of frustrated 24-year-olds or 20-year-olds who are disenfranchised in Rwanda and looking for a place to go. Have you seen any evidence of that at all?

● (1350)

Dr. Yolande Bouka: I have not. DRC and Rwanda have this agreement where former FDLR from Congo are being demobilized and sent back to Rwanda, where they go through a re-education process and try to reintegrate.

I have not heard of people in Rwanda leaving Rwanda to go to the DRC to fight, but we have heard of people from Burundi leaving Burundi to fight in RED-Tabara and Forebu, which are armed groups specifically linked to the Burundian crisis.

What you are mentioning could be true, but I haven't seen evidence of it or reports.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): There are five more minutes for the Liberal Party if somebody has a question.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'm afraid I'll ask you another general question, but I can't get over this six million figure, six million people dying because of the conflict.

I have the strong sense that if, in North America, over a two-decade period, six million people died because of conflict, it would have our attention. Our attention would be seized on it day in and day out, media attention and otherwise.

What explains the world's lack of attention when it comes to the Congo?

I'm not setting up a straw man question for you, because one could immediately say racism, and I think that's a factor here. One could also say that there is conflict fatigue because Africa has been home to so many wars and civil wars.

What are your thoughts? You're an expert. You've studied this for some time. Why is the world not focused on the Congo?

Dr. Yolande Bouka: I think people have focused on Congo.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: They have, but why is it not at the forefront of global attention?

Dr. Yolande Bouka: I think one of the reasons is that it's lasted for a while. Congo has been in the news for the past 25 years, almost. Pretty soon it will be almost 25 years.

There has been, I think, this resignation on the part of Western donors with regard to various initiatives and the lack of.... I go back to the region a lot. The neighbouring countries have made a huge difference, but there is often the sense that, if you send American diplomats or French diplomats, and you put a little bit of pressure and a little bit of threat of sanctions, you'll see a development, and if you don't, there is nothing you can do.

I think what has been very apparent in the past decade or so is the importance of putting pressure on the neighbours to do something. I will give you a brief example to illustrate that point. In the 1990s, when Burundi was in the middle of a civil war, what made a difference was not the European Union crying and saying, "Oh, you're going to have a genocide", but it was Uganda compelling all the countries in the region to have a full blockade on Burundi, forcing the Tutsi elite to negotiate when their country was completely blockaded. Blockades work really well. If you follow the history of war, they work pretty well, particularly when you are landlocked.

I think there is this idea that, if you come and if you pay attention, things will get solved. I think the Western partners have not found a way to compel the region to assess and to address the DRC.

I think as well one of the reasons we don't see it so much is that, unlike Syria, you don't have long trails of migration that cut across all the way to Europe. Regional actors have been very, very good and very generous with regard to refugees. Tanzania has taken hundreds of thousands of refugees, and Malawi and Kenya have, too. The countries in the region are doing as much as they can in order to at least absorb the massive influx of people so that it doesn't become an emergency.

The dynamics now have shifted from the DR Congo to South Sudan and to Somalia with the global war on terror, and now the Sahel, Mali, and so forth. If it's relatively contained, people will go to it once it explodes. That's just the nature of politics and security, and DRC seems to be this country where we've had the same dynamics. Oftentimes people think it's the same dynamics, but they've evolved, and they're focusing on another part of the region. It's just limited resources and political imperatives.

● (1355)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): I have one last question. Typically, in these kinds of circumstances, rape is used as a tool to intimidate those people who you are against politically. Have we seen that in the Congo?

Dr. Yolande Bouka: We have. We've seen the use of sexual violence as a means to intimidate and to subjugate groups for quite some time. The use of sexual violence varies across different groups. I think it's important to know that some of these groups use it as a way to get soldiers to bond together. It's a way of consolidating the ranks. That's the case in Congo. It has been the case in other wars in other parts of the world as well. Some of the sexual violence is also used as a weapon of war. In other cases, sexual violence is simply permitted, but not necessarily promoted.

There are these various ways in which you have the prevalence of sexual violence across a region, across a lot of countries on the continent, and elsewhere in the world. For a long time Congo was seen as the resource curse, diamond conflict, or mineral conflict, and then the sexual violence capital of the world. There are a lot more complicated dynamics, but yes, absolutely, because of the chaos and the lack of governance, we have a prevalence of sexual violence, but it's not always weaponized.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): To Mr. Fragiskatos' question earlier, you mentioned one of the reasons this continues is that there was a feeling of the lack of justice in the previous two wars.

Do we have organizations on the ground collecting evidence now to be able to bring about, not only peace, but justice, afterwards?

Dr. Yolande Bouka: Yes. Of course you have the UN panel of experts that continues to document human rights violations. I have colleagues at Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch who try their best to document and put names on who's responsible. The ICC has also been involved. The problem with very big international tribunals is that they try to focus on the big names and not the actual implementers, like the people who engage in the violence.

Because of the complicity of some portion of the government, it's difficult to get access to be able to investigate, and transparency is sometimes a challenge. Also, I know the South Africans—if I'm not mistaken, because they are deployed there—have a mobile unit that deals with sexual violence within their ranks to try to hold their soldiers accountable. You know, the UN has had issues as well, with sexual violence and abuse of populations in Congo and elsewhere. This is also a component that is not often discussed very much.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Thank you very much. You enlightened all of us.

Dr. Yolande Bouka: It's my pleasure.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Your expertise is very evident. We appreciate it.

Colleagues, we will see you the day after tomorrow.

The meeting is adjourned.