

Extra Feature Story

Civil War in Congo Tied to Natural Resources and Ethnic Rivalries

November 11, 2008

In the Central African nation of Democratic Republic of Congo, a conflict largely financed by mining the metals that make video games and cell phones has driven hundreds of thousands from their homes and spread death and destruction in what the United Nations is calling one of the most dangerous crises on Earth.

Rebel leader General Laurent Nkunda and his army invaded eastern DR Congo (another neighboring country is called the Republic of Congo) in late August, overrunning towns and taking up positions near the city of Goma. The conflict has created chaos in the country, displacing 250,000 and leaving 100 people dead, according to Agence France-Presse.

Humanitarian groups are also warning of an outbreak of cholera, a bacterial infection caused by consuming contaminated food or water.

"The humanitarian situation is more than disastrous, difficult to accept," said French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, according to the AFP.

Cause of the conflict

The fighting in the DR Congo is tied to the 1994 genocide in neighboring Rwanda, where members of one ethnic group, the Hutu, killed hundreds of thousands of members of the Tutsis, another group.

General Nkunda, a Tutsi, says he is invading the Democratic Republic of Congo in order to protect other minority Tutsis from Hutu militia that fled to the region after being ousted from power in Rwanda.

Freelance journalist and fellow at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University Mvemba Dizolele said the Hutu militia has been used to justify past invasions by Rwanda, which may be supporting Nkunda.

"(The Hutu militiamen) are ruthless. They live in the mountains. They threaten the population, oppress the population, rape women, run a lot of trade. I'm talking about minerals and any other riches that you find in the region. Those are specifically the cause of this war," Dizolele told the NewsHour.

Nkunda threatens takeover

General Nkunda has threatened to take over all of the DR Congo, which is the size of the entire eastern United States, if the democratically elected leader, Joseph Kabila, refuses to negotiate with him.

The DR Congo's government considers Nkunda a criminal.

The United Nations is concerned that other southern African countries, which support the DR Congo, will enter the mix. Leaders from the Southern African Development Community said Nov. 9 that they were willing to send peacekeeping troops to the region if

necessary, and there are reports that soldiers from neighboring Angola are already in DR Congo.

The United Nations also has 17,000 peacekeepers in DR Congo, its largest troop commitment in the world, but the country is too large to protect, Mvemba Dizolele told the NewsHour.

The situation is similar to the civil wars in the region during the 1990s, when several African states backed different warlords fighting for control in the wake of the Rwandan genocide, according to the BBC.

Important natural resources

While many in this area of Africa are poor, the DR Congo has valuable natural resources that armies use to buy weapons and uniforms.

Eastern DR Congo in particular has 80 percent of the world's supply of coltan, which is needed to make video games, cell phones and computers.

"(DR Congo) is a poor country on the surface, but underground it's one of the richest countries in the world. Congo today holds largest deposits of copper, coltan, gold, diamond, and so on and so forth," Dizolele said.

Militias control the areas with coltan and then sell it in Rwanda and Uganda to buy equipment for their soldiers.

Upwards of four million people have died in the region since 1998, mostly due to hunger and disease as a result of the chaos, the New York Times reported.

-- Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra

© 2008 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions