

## House Armed Services Committee

Testimony by Ben Affleck, Founder of Eastern Congo Initiative

Wednesday, December 19, 2012

Chairman McKeon, Congressman Smith, Distinguished Members of the Armed Services Committee, on behalf of Eastern Congo Initiative, I want to first thank you for holding this hearing and devoting your time and attention to the on-going crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo. My name is Ben Affleck, and I am the founder of Eastern Congo Initiative. We are the only U.S. based grant-making and advocacy organization entirely focused on working with and for the people of eastern Congo, a region that has the unwanted distinction of being one of the most volatile in the world and the site of the deadliest conflict since World War II.

From the outset, let me say that I am not here to ask for precious American tax dollars, I am here today to respectfully request you use the most important power you have, your collective voice as representatives of the United States of America.

From 1998 to 2003, eight African nations fought on Congolese soil, causing the death of millions, forcing tens of thousands of children to become child soldiers and, in some areas of Congo, subjecting as many as two of every three women to rape and other forms of sexual violence. The United Nations estimates that as many as 900,000 Congolese have been newly displaced in North Kivu province since fighting reignited early this year. As you know, just few weeks ago Goma, the economic center and capital of North Kivu province was temporarily controlled by the newly formed M23 militia injuring hundreds, displacing tens of thousands. M23 is just the latest in a long list of armed groups who have destabilized Congo since 1994.

With the latest violence, the world is reminded that the systemic sources of instability in this region have yet to be addressed.

Still, in the face of this violence and suffering, the people of eastern Congo remain committed to helping their neighbors and rebuilding their communities. ECI's staff and our partners have continued to work throughout the crisis, not only providing humanitarian assistance but continuing important development activities focused on a brighter future. When heavy shelling began last month near our office in Goma, the surgeons, doctors and nurses of ECI's partner, HEAL Africa, rushed to the hospital anticipating increased numbers of wounded in what is an already overcrowded hospital. Many of these same caregivers were still at the hospital five days later, providing free treatment to numerous civilians wounded in the conflict. Another ECI partner, Mutaani FM, continued to broadcast news throughout the crisis. Mutaani, the only independent radio station in Goma, is located across the street from the Congolese Army's headquarters, which was seized and occupied by M23 during the height of the conflict. Despite the odds, these brave journalists, all young adults in their twenties, stayed on the airwaves either reporting from the front lines or locked safely inside the radio station -- reporting on the fighting as it spread across the region.

Every day, I am inspired by the resilience and determination of the Congolese, who desperately want to live their lives in peace, earn a decent living, and raise their families just like the rest of us. Frankly, Mr. Chairman, they deserve better than the cycle of violence and upheaval that continues to undermine their daily work of rebuilding this war torn community.

While the M23 has withdrawn from Goma, they have not disbanded. In fact, as of this morning, our team on the ground tells us they are just 4 miles away from the city center and

there are fears that they may attack Goma again. We have seen this cycle repeat itself too many times: violence flares up, and the international community turns its attention, for a moment, to this part of the world. Violence recedes, and the world turns away in relief, without addressing the systemic issues that must be dealt with in order for lasting peace to be established and maintained.

Since my very first visit to Congo in 2006, it is clear to me that the pursuit of durable peace in Congo is not hopeless, quite the contrary in fact. The solutions are not new, or particularly complex. But without persistent, high-level leadership by the United States, the key players will not come to the table and do their part.

First, let's set aside the notion that the recent talks in Kampala will end this cycle of violence. Last week's negotiations were not even attended by the region's key players. It's for this reason that ECI has called on the UN Secretary General to appoint a Special Envoy, under the joint auspices of the UN and the African Union, to bring all stakeholders together to craft real, implementable solutions. We are delighted that Assistant Secretary Johnnie Carson announced the State Department's support for this idea in his recent testimony.

For 15 years, the United Nations has run a peacekeeping mission in Congo. The time has come to fundamentally reconsider the scope of its mandate. As M23 moved into Goma, the 17,000 troops deployed across DRC that make up the United Nations Stabilization Mission – known as MONUSCO – did not protect the civilians in harm's way. This failure raises serious concerns. That said, the larger failure most certainly lies with DRC's own security forces' continued inability to protect their citizens. With focused U.S. leadership, the UN mandate should reflect the needs of the country and the DRC security sector must be reformed.

Last week, we were delighted that the UN Secretary General launched a review of MONUSCO's mission. We hope the United States will take the lead in the Security Council supporting significant changes to MONUSCO's mandate. At a minimum, the mandate must be strengthened to enable whatever force remains to actually keep the peace and protect the people. We also believe the UN's mandate in Congo should not be indefinite. An open-ended mandate undermines the urgency for the Congolese government to take responsibility for protecting their own citizens.

Looking beyond the United Nations, donor countries have enormous leverage in the region, which they should exert to bring key regional players together for serious negotiations. International donors can play a more active role in preventing violence from returning.

And of course, Congo's neighbors play a critical role in regional security -- there will be no lasting stability without their leadership. The United Nations has been presented with evidence that M23 is sustained by significant outside support from Rwanda and Uganda. If the accusations are true, any support must end. Congo's neighbors have legitimate security concerns, and their national economies greatly benefit from DRC's natural resources. We hope the Presidents of Rwanda and Uganda will engage in serious discussion about the many issues that affect regional stability. The Obama administration can and should leverage its unique relationship with these leaders to insist they pursue resolutions directly with the government in Congo, rather than indirectly through the support of armed militias.

It is not enough for M23 to withdraw from Goma. Until the militia is disbanded, the people of eastern Congo will live with the daily threat of violence. To be clear, eliminating M23 alone

will not restore peace. Just the last time I was in Congo, in February, there were at least 27 armed groups operating in the eastern provinces.

The regional aspects of this conflict include failures in Kinshasa. Since the last cease-fire in 2006, too little has changed inside Congo. Kinshasa must take seriously its lack of legitimacy in many parts of Congo and act now to address the grievances of its people. When Goma fell to M23, there were spontaneous protests in Bukavu, Kisangani and Kinshasa, aimed not only at militia violence, but also at the failure of President Kabila's government to protect its citizens.

To restore legitimacy, the Independent National Electoral Commission should immediately set a date for, and begin to organize the provincial elections that were supposed to take place in March of this year. The Electoral Commission itself has been seen by opposition parties and international election observers as an obstacle to political legitimacy – it should be reformed.

President Kabila must also commit to the over-due reform of Congo's security sector. Without competent military and law-enforcement institutions, Congo's territory will continue to provide safe haven to armed groups who prey on civilians and disrupt economic development. In April of this year, ECI helped lead an effort, alongside nearly 300 Congolese civil society organizations, to publish a comprehensive report about the need for security sector reform (SSR) in Congo. This report, which I ask to be submitted for the record, calls for an end to the conflict through a comprehensive reform of security institutions, which include the military and law enforcement such as the police and the courts. President Kabila has expressed an interest in SSR, but it has not been a priority of his Administration. It must become a priority now, and the U.S. has an important role to play in ensuring this happens.

Mr. Chairman, I realize we are laying out a very broad agenda. But we know that none of this -- not the revised MONUSCO mandate, the increased donor involvement, the responsible behavior of DRC's neighbors, or internal DRC reforms -- will happen without direct, high-level, focused U.S. leadership. President Obama and many of you have unique leverage with key international and regional stakeholders, and the United States is held in very high regard by the Congolese people. Your leadership can make a difference if we act decisively, and do so today. This is why ECI has called on the President to appoint a temporary special envoy to signal clearly that finding a lasting solution to the crisis in Central Africa is a priority for his administration. Past models for this approach -- sending Senator John Kerry to Sudan, the late veteran diplomat Richard Holbrooke to the Balkans, or General Colin Powell to Haiti -- demonstrate that high-level diplomatic intervention at the right moment can cut through deadly impasse and open the path toward lasting stability.

At the United Nations, the new presidential envoy should work with Secretary General Ban Ki Moon to establish a time table for regional negotiations, revise MONUSCO's mandate, and draw up a strategy for reinstating a cease-fire, in case violence flares up again.

Internationally, the U.S. should encourage our NATO allies and other key partners to provide police, judicial and military training so the Congolese government can increase its capacity to protect its own people as MONUSCO's mandate winds down. U.S. Africa Command's (AFRICOM) work with the Congolese Army has demonstrated that a little training can have a big impact. During the most recent crisis, ECI's staff in Goma got a car stuck in a ditch -- it happens a lot, unfortunately. A truck full of Congolese soldiers pulled up and offered to help. To be honest, our staff wasn't sure what to expect: in the past, this kind of "help"

would most likely have been accompanied by a request for a bribe. In this case, the soldiers brought the car out of the ditch and waved good-bye. It turns out they were part of the unit that AFRICOM trained in 2010.

The successful AFRICOM training mission is only the latest example in the 52 years since Congo's independence of the close U.S.-Congoese ties. As a major donor of humanitarian and other assistance our country has much more influence in Kinshasa than we have been willing to exert. The President's envoy should engage directly with President Kabila to accept assistance in developing a strategy for implementing comprehensive security sector reform. With an agreed-upon deadline in place for announcing the SSR strategy, the U.S. should step in to provide Congo with whatever technical support it needs -- in partnership with the EU, NATO, and others -- to complete planning.

AFRICOM's plan to train a second unit of the FARDC should be put on hold until provincial elections are organized and President Kabila produces – and commits to – a workable plan for implementing comprehensive security sector reform. But once that commitment is clear, Congo will need – and deserves – international support to ensure reform takes hold.

Mr. Chairman, I know that Congress – and the Armed Services Committee in particular – hears more urgent requests for U.S. leadership in the world than can be answered. Resolving the cycle of violence does not necessarily require a significant new financial investment by the United States, or U.S. boots on the ground. It does, however, require American political leadership -- moral leadership even -- to bring the parties together to address the larger sources of instability in the region.

I may be naïve, but I believe that our actions in foreign policy represent our values as a country – they represent who we are as a people. Soon I will be making my tenth trip to Congo, and I know that, if your constituents were to go to Congo and see what is happening there, they would insist we do something about it. I founded ECI in part to serve as a megaphone to amplify the voices of the people of eastern Congo, and I thank you for the opportunity to do that today. Even in the face of violence and upheaval, the Congolese remain resilient and entirely determined to rebuild their country. The seventy million Congolese deserve a better tomorrow, and they haven't given up trying to build a peaceful future. With support from Congress, and leadership from the President, the United States can help them get there. We can help, and we should.

Thank you very much. I look forward to your questions.