Over 100,000 people fled the latest violence around Goma, and across eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Many have had to flee their homes in the past year, leaving behind loved ones, homes and livelihoods and taking with them just a few possessions or nothing at all.
Worsening crisis
A surge in violence across eastern Congo has forced 750,000 people to flee their homes in the past year, as civilians face killings, forced recruitment, extortion and sexual violence at the hands of numerous armed groups and even the Congolese security forces. In late 2012 the crisis deteriorated even further as the fighting reached Goma, the capital of North Kivu. At least 140,000 people have been affected and are now sheltering in desperate conditions in camps in and around Goma. Many have been displaced two, three or even more times, trying to escape the conflict. People are in urgent need of clean water, health-care, food, shelter and protection from violence.

The situation
The recent fighting around Goma has pushed one of the world’s biggest humanitarian crises over the edge, and the situation in eastern Congo is now worse than it has been for several years. However, the crisis in Goma is just the tip of the iceberg. Since April 2011, when the “M23” rebellion launched, the number and reach of armed groups has mushroomed. The government army pulled troops out of much of the east to focus on the rebellion and other armed groups took advantage of the security vacuum. At least 25 rebel groups are now active across North and South Kivu, attacking civilians and displacing hundreds of thousands of people. A recent Oxfam report found that civilians have become commodities of war and are forced to fund the war that devastates their lives – they not only face killings, rape and displacement, but are “taxed” and looted when farmers go to their fields and traders go to markets. People are going hungry in one of the most fertile regions of the world.

People in North and South Kivu have lived for months with constant instability, and decades of conflict and marginalisation have eroded people’s ability to cope with crises. They are now faced with constant displacement as they search for safety. The most urgent needs now are to get humanitarian assistance to people affected by the conflict, and for ordinary people to be better protected by the Congolese army and UN peacekeepers. But the underlying causes of conflict – such as poverty, the need for army reform, tensions over land and resources, and international responses that do not take local opinions and solutions into account – must also be addressed so that people can live in peace. DR Congo is the biggest country in sub-Saharan Africa and the crisis threatens to destabilise the entire region. It needs a long-term regional solution.
Kakuru Hakiza, age 38, from Sake

“There was a lot of fighting – I heard both loud guns and small guns. On that day I lost one of my sons, he was 12 years old. When we left, everyone was running everywhere. It was chaos. First we ran to Mubambiro and that was when we lost him. When we arrived someone told us that they had seen his body on the road, and that he was caught in an explosion. So we went to get him, and buried him there. Then we came to Lac Vert.”

How many times have you had to leave your home?
Three times

What is the most precious thing you have lost?
My son is the most precious thing that I have lost.

What do you miss most?
My home. I can never go home again.
Vo Vumiuya Bwira, age 45, from Kimoka, about 6km from Sake

She has left her home 10 times as a result of conflict – the first time during the fighting with CNDP. Every time she comes to the Bulengo/Lac Vert area, and she is now sheltering in the church in Lac Vert.

“We stay for a month or so, then we go home again for a few months and we can work in the fields. And then the fighting starts again, and we leave again. So that has become the rhythm of life. Most of the time we are surprised. There is no warning and we run with nothing. Sometimes in the morning or afternoon. We don’t have time to take anything with us.”

What is the most precious thing you have lost?
Really, it is a part of our life we lose every time we leave our homes. It’s like going to prison. Every time we leave is like a prison sentence and we lose everything – our possessions, our animals, everything. The most precious things we lose are members of our families – children, husbands. I lost my cousin. Gradually we are losing our lives. When we are home we are farmers and cultivate the land, but every time we leave we lose everything. At home if we need anything to eat, we go to our fields; if we need to buy anything we can sell the food we grow and get money. I miss the land because it is the land that allows us to live and to work. Most people in Masisi work as farmers and traders. But with the war we can’t do either and so we can’t give our families everything that they need. What we need most is peace.

What are you most afraid of?
We don’t understand what is happening. We want to go home, but it is difficult to keep restarting our lives. We don’t know who makes this war and why. But we lose everything.
Bernadette Nanzekuli, age 70
from Kibumba

Bernadette had been in Kanyaruchinya camp for two months before fleeing to Mugunga 1 camp as the fighting got closer. She now shelters in a classroom with her six children and grandchildren, and five other families. She will move to Bulengo when she can.

“We saw men with guns in the camp [Kanyaruchinya], and they were firing. We were afraid, so we had to leave. We were running and it was hard with the children.”
Dunia Sebayanda Boshab, age 24 from Kimoka

Dunia is alone in Lac Vert. He was separated from his wife and children on the day that fighting broke out in Sake. So far he has fled his home three times.

“I was in the fields and my wife was at home with the children. When the fighting started I went to find her in the house, but she was already gone. I still don’t know where they are. I have asked around but I have not yet had an answer. When I was in the field I had my hoe and machete with me. But when I heard the fighting, I dropped them and I ran empty handed.”

What is the most precious thing you have lost?
I have lost two things, my wife and children...and my home, which was destroyed in the fighting.

What do you miss most?
First, I miss the land, and I miss my home. It has been destroyed. I have lost my work, and I have lost the tools with which I work.

What are you most afraid of?
I am afraid of not being able to go back to the land. I am also afraid that this war is not yet finished. It could start again at any moment.

Kate Holt/Oxfam
Batechi Shamamba, age 24, from Sake
Batechi is currently staying with a host family until he can move into a shelter that he is building in Bulengo

“We heard bombs and gunshots. We didn’t have time to take anything with us. There was fighting all around. All I have is what you see now. In the morning I go to the lake to wash and clean my clothes. Then I wait there until everything is dry. I have nothing else with me...not even a pot to cook with.”
Eddy Mbuyi, age 27
from Goma

“I’m 27 years old and I have rarely known life without conflict, suffering, hunger, violence and disease. My country has seen millions die in one of the deadliest conflicts since World War Two. This renewed conflict is different to the many I have experienced before. I am now a dad. I have a two-year old daughter to think about. I feel guilty. Guilty that I cannot put an end to this and guarantee a safe future for her and for all the innocent children who suffer because of the violence. It is with a heavy heart that I watch her when she plays war games with other children – because I know that their games are more real than they can imagine. I spend many nights wondering what her future will bring. Will she spend her entire life, like I have spent mine, living in a war zone? Will she ever see her country in a state of peace?”
Oxfam is assisting affected communities in DRC

Oxfam teams have been scaling up our emergency response across eastern Congo for several months, as the conflict has worsened. We have further stepped-up work in response to the enormous humanitarian needs caused by the fighting in and around Goma since late 2012. In the Mugunga 1 and Lac Vert camps on the edge of Goma, and also at the Don Bosco site in the city itself, Oxfam trucks are delivering clean water and our teams are constructing new latrines to help prevent the spread of cholera, and a new more sustainable water system. We are also setting up water pumps for a new camp at Bulengo, which will help ease the overcrowding in the other camps. Our public health teams are working with committees in camps and children’s groups to raise awareness of how cholera is spread. In Lac Vert, which has seen a big influx of people in recent weeks, Oxfam teams have constructed 100 latrines, 90 showers, and are delivering 60,000 litres of safe water every day. Oxfam also has ongoing programmes in other parts of North and South Kivu – in areas such as Beni, Mweso and Masisi – providing water, sanitation, cash so that people can buy food, and working with local communities to help them realise their rights in the absence of adequate protection from violence.

Supporting refugees in Uganda

About 30,000 refugees from DRC have fled across the border into southwest Uganda, and Oxfam launched an emergency response in the Rwamwanja refugee camp. Oxfam teams have drilled boreholes to provide people with a source of safe water, have constructed nearly 1,000 latrines to improve sanitation, and have carried out public health campaigns to prevent disease, and have helped people to gain an income and buy food. There are limited opportunities for people in camps to make a living, so Oxfam has provided “cash for work” whereby 8,000 families receive money for working to repair and improve the local roads. As well as generating income for refugees this will also benefit the local community who are hosting the influx of so many people. So far at least 18kms of road has been opened. Oxfam is also working with a local mobile phone company to provide unconditional cash transfers to help the most vulnerable families buy food.

Supporting refugees in Rwanda

About 20,000 refugees have fled DRC into Rwanda. They initially took shelter in Nkamira transit camp, close to the DRC border, where Oxfam built latrines, set up washing stations, supported health campaigns using drama and songs, and distributed sanitary kits and jerry cans. As the transit camp exceeded its capacity, refugees were then moved to a larger camp at Kigeme in the southwest of Rwanda, where Oxfam set up water and sanitation infrastructure – installing water tanks, pumps and tap-stands, and constructing latrines and showers – and trained hygiene groups to improve public health in the camp. After setting up infrastructure and supporting the initial influx of people, Oxfam has handed over most of our work in the camps to local partner organisations. However we continue to provide technical support and monitor the situation in case more people arrive.
Together we can put an end to this crisis and change things for the better:

- Regional change must work for the good of the people. As negotiations to end the conflict continue, the African Union needs to play a greater leadership role to ensure that the talks respond to the needs of the people affected by the violence.

- This is a moment in time where previously made agreements must be honoured and even strengthened. The 2006 Pact on Security, Stability and Development is a deal that would help deliver peace, and the AU should push for its implementation. Any other deals made should strengthen the existing Pact rather than start afresh.

- The people of eastern DRC - who have suffered most from the crisis and have most at stake in its resolution - must be given the opportunity to help bring positive changes. The National Consultation Process recently announced by the DRC government, is a welcome step forward and should be prioritised.

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