

PRESS RELEASE



Lean season in DR Congo: Eleven aid agencies fear for hundreds of thousands in desperate need

Bonn, 22.10.2019. Hundreds of thousands of people who have fled their homes in the Ituri province of the Democratic Republic of Congo are in desperate need of food, water, shelter and medicines, eleven aid agencies warned today.

Six months on from a resurgence of horrendous violence the agencies said that people are dying every day from preventable diseases because of the appalling conditions they are living in, a statement from Action Against Hunger, AVSI, Danish Refugee Council, Intersos, Mercy Corps, Norwegian Refugee Council, Oxfam, Solidarite International, Tearfund, Trócaire & Welthungerhilfe said. The situation is deteriorating as the approach of lean season has already doubled some food prices forcing more people to go hungry.

The majority of people who have been displaced are living with vulnerable host families, stretching already poor communities, with little or no resources, to breaking point. Others are living in cramped conditions in public places, such as churches and schools or barely surviving in overcrowded makeshift camps. The agencies said that in some instances, up to 500 people are having to share one toilet, while others are having to drink dirty water that infects them with potentially deadly water-borne diseases. Many are sleeping on bare floors in flimsy shelters that offer very little protection from heavy rains. The conditions also increase the risk of sexual violence for women and girls.

Since May this year, hundreds of people have been killed during frenzied attacks by armed men in the Djugu and Mahagi territories with over 360,000 forced to flee for their lives leaving their entire villages destroyed.

The aid agencies are calling for the protection of all civilians and an end to the violence. Almost all of the displaced people they spoke to had witnessed atrocities.

One woman, Marie*, faced the unimaginable horror of losing her mother, two teenage daughters and infant sons - age three and two - who were all brutally beheaded by an armed group.

Marie said: "All my children have been beheaded. My mother too. The men came at 10 in the morning. Some were shooting in the air, while others cut off people's heads with machetes and knives. They surrounded the village

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and burned all the houses. They murdered everyone who tried to flee and hunted down anyone hiding in the forest. It is a miracle I escaped.”

Another woman, Rachel*, tragically lost her four children and husband, when they were attacked. She is trying to survive by working in the fields, but says she fears for her life every day.

Rachel said: “I came here (to the host community) a few months ago to escape the violence in my village. It was the second time I had to flee. I lost my four children and my husband because they were of a different ethnicity. Here, to live, I go to do daily work in the fields, but it’s not safe. Since I am carrying a machete to cultivate crops people think I am one of the attackers.”

The increased violence, which has multiple complex causes, has re-ignited tensions between different communities, with devastating consequences. People are no longer able to travel to the market, for fear of being attacked. Many were about to harvest but have been forced to abandon their fields and crops. They have now lost a fourth agricultural season in a row, which, in a largely rural economy means no food, income or means to survive.

The arrival of the lean season will put even more stress on what little food is available; in some places the price of beans and other staple food has already more than doubled. Nearly half of the population in the affected area is facing crisis levels of hunger.

Corinne N’Daw, Oxfam’s Country Director in DR Congo, said: “The situation is dire and many children are suffering from malnutrition. Most people have lost everything they own and have witnessed horrendous atrocities, now they face a deadly dilemma, do they go without food or risk their lives to go back to their fields.”

Since people are scattered across vast distances in remote areas, the eleven agencies said it is extremely challenging to reach all of those in need.

Martine Villeneuve, Country Director for the Danish Refugee Council in DR Congo, said: “There is not enough clean water, food or shelter and facilities like toilets, health centres and clean water points are stretched to breaking point. With large numbers of people living in overcrowded conditions and drastic levels of malnutrition, the situation is a toxic cocktail that is highly conducive for a rapid spread of diseases.”

Because there are very few medicines available, preventable diseases like measles, malaria, polio and respiratory tract infections are rife. In one informal settlement Oxfam visited in Kasenyi, where lots of displaced people were living in cramped conditions next to a church, three children had died the previous day and eight more had died in a month.

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Maureen Philippon, Country Director for the Norwegian Refugee Council in DR Congo, said: “This large new displacement is affecting people who were already struggling to recover from previous outbreaks of violence. Many have been forced to flee multiple times, becoming increasingly vulnerable every time they are uprooted from their homes and communities, and are forced to leave their belongings and livelihoods behind.”

Now is also the start of the school year in DR Congo, but many schools have been burnt down or are still being used as shelters for displaced people. Many thousands of young children displaced to rural villages and camps are not able and do not have the strength to go to school, giving them little prospect in both the immediate and distant future.

Nicoló Carcano from AVSI, who have been working to provide education in Ituri for many years, said: “The education system is in a critical state. There are not enough schools and the ones that are still standing are overcrowded and in terrible conditions. Protection for the children and facilities like clean water and toilets are virtually non-existent.”

The majority of humanitarian need in DR Congo is not being met in Ituri and other conflict-stricken areas across the country, leaving many to die from illness, hunger or exhaustion. Lessons have not been learned from a previous crisis in 2018 when lack of funding and insecurity meant agencies were not able to reach all of those in need. Ten months into 2018, DR Congo has only received 35 percent of funding needed, in a country where 15.6 million people are severely food insecure. The situation in Ituri is one of several humanitarian crises in DR Congo, including the Ebola outbreak, which was declared an international emergency three months ago.

Benjamin Vienot, Country Director for Action Against Hunger in DR Congo, said: “Aid agencies weren’t able to reach everyone who needed help during the last crisis in 2018 because of lack of funding and insecurity, which made access extremely challenging. We are now facing a similarly bleak picture.”

For further information see <https://www.welthungerhilfe.org/media/>

Notes to editors:

*Names have been changed to protect identities

Latest Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) for DR Congo, published in August 2019:

<http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1152131/>

The Number of people killed in Ituri is still subject of debate and no definitive numbers have been established yet. The Joint Human Rights Office recorded 117 deaths in two days between the 10th and 11th of June in Djugu territory and Mahagi. However, those numbers don’t take into account the killings which have occurred since then or those which happened at the end of May 2019 at the border between

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Djugu and Mahagi territory on the lake and for which civil society in Ramogi estimates that over 150 people were killed.



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Welthungerhilfe is one of the largest private aid organisations in Germany; politically independent and non-denominational. It is fighting for "Zero Hunger by 2030". Since it was founded in 1962, more than 9.331 overseas projects in 70 countries have been supported with 3.71 billion euros. Welthungerhilfe works on the principle of help for self-help: from fast disaster relief to reconstruction and long-term development cooperation projects with national and international partner organisations.

