

Report # 115
BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD
Central Africa
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Summary

1. Politics

"Wave of kidnappings" in Equatorial Guinea

Equatorial Guinea's main opposition party CPDS has accused national security forces of the kidnapping of several exiled Equatoguinean opposition members based in Nigeria in late January, disapproving a form of "state terrorism." The Guinean authorities have not officially confirmed the whereabouts of these four people, so it is legitimate to fear that they are being subjected to torture and other ill-treatment said the political party.

Rwanda Editor Says Suspension of Paper Politically Motivated

The editor of Rwanda's Umuvugizi independent newspaper said the suspension of his paper is politically motivated. Rwanda's Media High Council earlier this week suspended Umuvugizi and Umuseso for six months on the grounds the two weeklies violated Rwanda's media laws and provoked public order. Umuvugizi editor Jean Bosco Gasasira said the six-month suspension is intended to silence the two papers from covering Rwanda's presidential elections scheduled for August this year. Bosco Gasasira also mentioned about the president Paul Kagame who said in parliament that he's tired of the criticizing newspapers. He's going to close it in good faith or by force.

Rwanda: Kagame Receives Swedish Delegation

President Paul Kagame yesterday received a delegation from Sweden that included Members of Parliament and officials from the United Nations Association of Sweden at Urugwiro Village. The group, which is in the country on a 3-day working visit to assess the country's development, held discussions with the President on a number of issues, including economic growth, the upcoming presidential elections, human rights and relations with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

2. Peace keeping/ Conflict Resolution and Security matters

DRC: Fighting foils exams in South Kivu

IRIN

Hundreds of final year secondary school students have been unable to sit all their national exams due to fighting between a faction of the Mayi-Mayi militia and the armies in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) territory of Fizi, South Kivu Province, it was said by officials.

DRC: Humanitarian corridor opened for trapped civilians in northeast

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) government has opened a humanitarian corridor to provide safe passage for hundreds of civilians trapped by fighting between the army and rebel militias in Orientale Province, northeastern DRC. According to the local authorities, at least 5,000 civilians have been trapped since December 2009 in the Mukato Ngazi area about 100km south of Bunia, following a major government offensive against rebels in Potopoto, Mokato and Tchei, all south of Bunia, the main town in Ituri.

UN plans troop pullout from DRC

The UN peacekeeping mission MONUC has announced it will start pulling out from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) already in July. The UN pullout comes after a request from the Kinshasa government. The top UN official in the DRC told the UN Security Council today that the first stage of withdrawing blue helmets from the country by July as requested by government. However, the safety of civilians under threat from militias and criminals would suffer from the pullout.

UN: Congo Army Still Undisciplined

Fighting for control of the capital of Congo's Equateur province has revived concerns about the strength of Kinshasa's army at a time when United Nations peacekeepers will start withdrawing in June. President Joseph Kabila's government says its troops will be ready by the time all UN soldiers are gone next year. With nearly 22,000 troops this is the biggest U.N. peacekeeping mission. It has played a central role in restoring order in Congo, following two wars between 1998 and 2003 that resulted in the deaths of at least one-million people.

Red Cross staff seized in DR Congo

Al Jazeera

ICRC said that eight aid workers have been kidnapped by armed men in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. The seven Congolese and one Swiss national were seized near the town of Fizi in South Kivu province. Red Cross officials said that the kidnap had been staged by members of the Mai Mai Yakutumba militia. The Mai Mai group, which was formed to resist Rwandan Hutu forces who fled into DR Congo after the genocide, controls its own territory in the region.

Central Africa: Army Rescues Nine Women in Central African Republic

The army has rescued nine women abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the ongoing operations against the rebels in the Central African Republic (CAR). The women

included Ugandans, Congolese and Central Africans, according to a statement issued by the defense ministry spokesperson.

3. Human Rights/ Social Issues

Congo-Kinshasa: Conflict-Related Rape the Focus of UN Official's Visit

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict Margot Wallström is on her first tour since her appointment, conducting a week-long visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) where both rebels and the national army have been accused of mass rape. She will visit the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu where more than 8,000 women were raped by warring factions last year, according to UN Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates.

Congo-Kinshasa: New Report Shows Shocking Pattern of Rape in Eastern Congo

Survey reveals that sixty percent of rape victims gang raped, more than half in their own homes, appalling increase in number of civilian rapists. An extensive study of rape victims in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) commissioned by Oxfam and conducted by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, shows that 60 percent of rape victims surveyed were gang raped by armed men and more than half of assaults took place in the supposed safety of the family home at night, often in the presence of the victim's husband and children. While the majority of rapists were either soldiers or militiamen, the report also shows a shocking 17-fold increase in rapes carried out by civilians between 2004 and 2008. The study by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, which analyzed information collected from 4,311 female rape victims who were treated in Panzi hospital in South Kivu Province over a four-year period. Over 5,000 people were raped in South Kivu in 2009, according to the UN. The report comes out ahead of the UN Security Council visit to DRC this weekend, with the council set to renew the UN peacekeepers mandate in May.

Rwanda: CRS Launches Rwf 9 Billion Food Security Project

(US\$16m) project that aims to tackle food insecurity among people living with HIV/AIDS and orphans from nine districts was launched. The project is the second phase of the Catholic Relief Services' (CRS) Food and Nutritional Interventions Project (Ibyiringiro).

4. US-Africa

Rwanda: Kagame Receives U.S. Environmental Group

Conservation International (CI), an American environmental organization, is set to enter into a partnership with Rwanda which will focus on improving people's lives through conserving nature. Seligmann said that our partnership will focus on supporting human

wellbeing by restoring and maintaining ecosystems and nature. People need nature to thrive that is to have water security, climate security and food security.

5. Pan Africa

CEEAC parliament opened in Malabo

The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS, or CEEAC||) celebrated the opening of its new regional parliament in Malabo, the Equatoguinean capital, with the presence of all presidents of the Central African region. President Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of the host nation, Equatorial Guinea, received visiting state leaders and led the large inauguration festivities. He said that "The integration of our countries should presume an African renaissance," The festivities in Malabo had already started on Wednesday with the arrival of most state leaders of the Central African region. President Obiang received Chad's President Idriss Déby, Gabon's President Ali Bongo, Congo Brazzaville President Denis Sassou Nguesso and Central African Republic President François Bozizé. Cameroonian President Paul Biya and São Tomé and Príncipe's President Fradique de Menezes arrived yesterday, with the latter only present as observer to the CEEAC event. Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) President Joseph Kabila did not participate in the Malabo event, as the DRC is turning its focus away from the CEEAC and towards the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which also has a parliament in South Africa.

6. Economy and Energy

Gabon striking workers unmoved by govt call

Workers in the Gabon oil-industry have continued in the second day with their strike, despite a call by government for negotiations. Unions demand an end to discrimination of Gabonese labor. The Gabonese workers started the mass action yesterday complaining mainly of expatriate workers being given preference by oil companies, over the locals. Gabon is one of Africa's main oil producers alongside other producers such as Nigeria, Angola, Sudan, Equatorial Guinea and Congo Brazzaville, with an estimated production of over 230 barrels per day of crude.

7. Elections and Governness

Burundi Launches Ambitious Infrastructure Development Plan

Recent clashes between opposition and government supporters in Burundi have many worried that the upcoming elections could destabilize the country. An international human rights organization says that Burundian Police must take action or risk the

legitimacy of the poll. Tensions are high in Burundi after a confrontation between supporters of Burundi's main opposition party, The National Forces of Liberation or FNL, and the ruling party last week. The elections will cap a 5 year transition to democracy, initiated by the peace agreements which ended the civil war. Burundians will vote in a series of local and national elections which will run from May to September.

Details

1. Politics

"Wave of kidnappings" in Equatorial Guinea

Afrol News

Equatorial Guinea's main opposition party CPDS has accused national security forces of the abduction of several exiled Equatoguinean opposition members based in Nigeria in late January, denouncing a form of "state terrorism."

The National Council of the Convergence for Social Democracy (CPDS) in a statement issued in Bata today said that the hostages are the captain José Abeso Nsue, frigate lieutenant Manuel Ndong Anseme, the customs guard Jacinto Micha Obiang and Alipio Ndong Asumu.

"The Guinean authorities have not officially confirmed the whereabouts of these four people, so it is legitimate to fear that they are being subjected to torture and other ill-treatment," said the political party.

The main Equatoguinean party says it has reports of abduction of Equatoguinean refugees in neighboring countries by security officials of Equatorial Guinea, sometimes with the complicity of the security services of those countries, cited the same sources.

The CPDS statement also recalled that Manuel Osa Mba, Rufino Eyene Nse, Miguel Obama Ndong, José Esono Nsue and Ricardo Ecuá Mba - Equatoguineans exiled in Libreville, Gabon, had suffered several kidnapping attempts by Equatoguinean security officials between August and September 2005. The attempts had been "in complicity with elements of Gabonese services." To protect them, some of these refugees were granted asylum in the United States, where they now live.

According to the CPDS, Equatoguinean security forces are operating all over the region, harassing exiled nationals. In Ghana, the party said, exiled ex-Minister Ricardo Mba Nguema was "currently" being harassed by Equatoguinean services.

In October 2008, the statement adds, Cipriano Nguema Mba, a former Guinean army lieutenant colonel, was kidnapped in Cameroon and brought to Equatorial Guinea by security forces. "He is currently held in prison in Evinayong," CPDDS claimed.

Further, Fabián Ovono Esono and José Ndong allegedly were "kidnapped in Nigeria in December 2008 and released after an Amnesty International urgent action on their behalf in March 2009."

The CPDS National Council in the strongest terms condemned "the policy of kidnappings encouraged by the Equatoguinean regime, which is a form of state terrorism and conflicts with neighbours and friends."

The opposition party also urged the Equatoguinean regime to make public the whereabouts of all "the hostages" that had been brought secretly to Equatorial Guinea, and to recognise their arrest.

Finally, the CPDS urged the regime of President Teodoro Obiang Nguema to "immediately end its policy of kidnappings and attacks on opponents abroad and to undertake to respect the national and international legal instruments it has signed."

Rwanda Editor Says Suspension of Paper Politically Motivated

VOA

The editor of Rwanda's Umuvugizi independent newspaper said the suspension of his paper is politically motivated.

Rwanda's Media High Council earlier this week suspended Umuvugizi and Umuseso for six months on the grounds the two weeklies violated Rwanda's media laws and incited public order.

Umuvugizi editor Jean Bosco Gasasira said the six-month suspension is intended to silence the two papers from covering Rwanda's presidential elections scheduled for August this year.

"As you know we are entering into election period; the election period is going to be in August, but campaign starts in May. The Media High Council suspended our newspapers before getting orders from the Ministry of Justice. Secondly, just hours before that, the president (Paul Kagame) said in parliament that he's tired of the criticizing newspapers. He's going to close it in good faith or by force," he said.

The Chairman of the Rwanda Media High Council, Arthur Asimwe, in announcing the suspension accused Umuvugizi and Umuseso of mixing news and opinions in their reporting.

Asimwe reportedly said most of the articles written by the two newspapers since January this year were full of fabrications and were provocative.

Editor Gasasira described Asimwe's comments as false political allegations and propaganda.

He said the Media High Council is a tool of the ruling Rwanda Patriotic Front party. “In the constitution, the Media High Council is supposed to be independent. But it’s not independent of the ruling party; it’s not independent of the government; they are just a political tool,” Gasasira said.

Gasasira rejected assertions by Media High Council Executive Secretary Patrice Mulama that Umuvugizi and Umuseso failed to respond to warnings from the council about their reporting.

“When a newspaper in Rwanda, according to the new media law, writes anything inciting or anything bad, the Media High Council summons them and forces them to make correction of that. When they refused, they are at least suspended for two months. Then if they repeat that, you suspend them for six months. Neither Umuseso nor Umuvugizi have never been summoned by the Media High Council officially nor suspended for two months which shows that this was politically motivated. They just want to eliminate us before the election campaign,” Gasasira said.

Rwandan Justice Minister Tharcisse Karugarama said the Media High Council acted within Rwandan laws when it suspended the two papers.

“As far as I know from the legal point of view, the law on the media empowers the Media High Council to do that. The law provides both disciplinary and criminal proceedings. The penal code does indeed punish. Some of the utterances, some of the publications that the two papers were engaged in, I don’t think any criminal proceedings had been invoked at all. I think what has happened is that the Media High Council took disciplinary actions against the two papers,” Karugarama said.

Gasasira said President Paul Kagame had warned journalists critical of his government to leave Rwanda or face their papers being shut down.

But he said he’s not a coward and would not be driven into exile.

“Right now when I’m talking to you, I’m a lamed person. My left hand side has a stroke when they tried to assassinate me in 2007. I’m living on medication; I’m a living person who has a lot of health problems because of my line of duty. So I’ve become a sacrifice of my work. So I don’t believe in escaping the country; I don’t believe being a coward. I will remain here,” Gasasira said.

Gasasira described as untrue allegations by Media High Council Executive Secretary Patrice Mulama that media criticism of the Kagame government could lead to decline in foreign investment in Rwanda.

He said most foreign embassies in Rwanda subscribe to Umuvugizi and Umuseso. “Umuvugizi and Umuseso are the best selling newspapers in the country. They are the only independent newspapers in the country. All embassies subscribe, all investors

subscribe. So let them say the true that they are tired of our criticizing, of our independent view and analysis," Gasasira said.

Umuvugizi and Umuseso are known for their critical coverage of the ruling Rwanda Patriotic Front party.

Both Paris-based Reporters without Borders and New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists have condemned the suspensions.

Rwanda: Kagame Receives Swedish Delegation

The New Times

Urugwiro Village — President Paul Kagame yesterday received a delegation from Sweden that included Members of Parliament and officials from the United Nations Association of Sweden at Urugwiro Village,

The group, which is in the country on a 3-day working visit to assess the country's development, held discussions with the President on a number of issues, including economic growth, the upcoming presidential elections, human rights and relations with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

In an interview, Aleksander Gabelic from the UN Association of Sweden noted that the discussions with the President gave them an insight into Rwanda's development path since the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

"We talked about the aspect of the Genocide and reconciliation. We also raised questions that are important for the Swedish-international perspective; the values of the UN, democracy and human rights," Gabelic said.

According to Gabelic, the talks which were held in 'a good atmosphere, also touched on the upcoming elections as well as freedom of the press and social well-being.

"They basically wanted to have an insight on how we have managed to get where we are today in terms of economic development in a short period. The talks also touched on our relations with DRC and whether the MONUC mandate should be extended," said Finance Minister, John Rwangombwa.

During their visit, the group will assess the impact of One UN in terms of development and keeping regional stability as well the contribution of Sweden to the country's development.

They are scheduled to visit the One UN offices, Forum for Rwanda Women Parliamentarians, National Service for Gacaca Courts and Rwanda Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission among others.

2. Peace keeping/ Conflict Resolution and Security matters

DRC: Fighting foils exams in South Kivu

IRIN

Hundreds of final year secondary school students have been unable to sit all their national exams due to fighting between a faction of the Mayi-Mayi militia and the armies in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) territory of Fizi, South Kivu Province, say officials.

“Fighting broke out at dawn on 13 April as we were preparing for the second day of examinations... No final year student or [education] inspector could go to the exam centres as most Fizi town residents were forced to flee gun battles after Mayi-Mayi militiamen attacked the town,” Pierre Lulonga, the head of the secondary and primary school education branch in Fizi, said.

Seven people died in the fighting between the army and the Union du Peuple Congolais pour la Revolution Mayi-Mayi faction, a witness told IRIN. The faction is also known as Mayi-Mayi Yakutumba, after the name of its leader.

At least 487 students were affected, having only sat the first day of the exams scheduled for 12-16 April, Lulonga said.

Fighting in the town only lasted a day, but a new date for the exams is yet to be set as most students fled with their families. “Many students are still hiding in the bush with their families but once most of the residents of Fizi town return to their homes, we will set a new date so that the affected students can catch up with the rest of the secondary school students in the country,” he said.

Meanwhile, the government is encouraging residents to return home, saying there is no threat of new attacks. “We are using communal radio stations to tell residents the situation is now calm and that the army has re-established security so that they can return,” Kati Kasindi, Fizi deputy administrator, told IRIN.

Residents, however, are reluctant to leave the bush as fighting is still going on in villages around Fizi town, Kasindi said.

“Many residents fear the Mayi-Mayi militia may attack the town again... but we believe that they [the residents] are going to change their minds as they are hearing from those who have already returned,” he added.

DRC: Humanitarian corridor opened for trapped civilians in northeast

IRIN

BUNIA, 15 April 2010 (IRIN) - The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) government has opened a humanitarian corridor to provide safe passage for hundreds of civilians trapped by fighting between the army and rebel militias in Orientale Province, northeastern DRC.

“We decided on this corridor as we have registered hundreds of deaths and severe disease among the civilian population trapped between the militias and FARDC [Congolese army]. With the corridor they are able to get to safe zones,” Rustic Avo, Ituri District deputy commissioner, said.

According to the local authorities, at least 5,000 civilians have been trapped since December 2009 in the Mukato Ngazi area about 100km south of Bunia, following a major government offensive against rebels in Potopoto, Mokato and Tchey, all south of Bunia, the main town in Ituri.

“They have suffered and are continuing to suffer. FARDC mistook them for rebels... and the rebel militias used them as shields - looting, torturing and raping them,” said a local Ngity (ethnic group) leader, who preferred anonymity, in Walendu Bindi area.

On 12 March, Walendu Bindi’s civil society said soldiers had shot at a group of women among this population who had gone to the fields in search of cassava leaves for food. Six women allegedly died, among them two who were pregnant.

A group of student activists, who went into the area in March, expressed concern.

“We only spent four days [there] and counted 21 dead people and several graves here and there; most of the dead were mothers and children,” said Adaba Masumbuko, group leader. The area also lacked sanitary structures and schools.

“I counted about 300 sick people who could not stand...” said Kobvo Angaika, another member of the group. They, and their dependants, are clearly not able to use the humanitarian corridor, he said.

Ituri region, northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo The UN Refugee Agency has deployed two trucks in the village of Ozoba, in Irumu Territory, to transport the displaced who are weakened by trekking long distances.

According to Ituri deputy commissioner Avo, about 10 of the civilians have died along the way. Four more died in Aveba, 90km south of Bunia. "We were thinking that the very sick would be evacuated by helicopter," he said.

The Lutheran World Foundation has started distributing food aid to some 47,000 displaced people in the region. Médecins Sans Frontières Swiss has also set up a transit health site in Aveba where care for sexual violence victims is being provided.

So far, Ituri's population movement commission has registered 167,000 displaced people of whom 64 percent are in Irumu, south of Bunia, where the army fought FRPI (Front de Résistance Patriotique en Ituri)/FPJC (Front Populaire pour le Justice au Congo) militias.

An estimated 2,000 FRPI/FPJC militia members are yet to be disarmed, according to the national disarmament programme.

District officials, however, note that the number of displaced is unclear as some people have sought refuge in Uganda.

According to the UN Mission in the DRC (MONUC), rebel militias are seeking to replenish their ammunition and food supplies following recent army and MONUC operations against them.

At present, the area south of Bunia remains dangerous with military escorts required to get there, said the head of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Orientale Province, Jean Charles Dupin.

UN plans troop pullout from DRC

Afrol News

The UN peacekeeping mission MONUC has announced it will start pulling out from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) already in July. The UN pullout comes after a request from the Kinshasa government.

The top UN official in the DRC told the UN Security Council today that the first stage of withdrawing blue helmets from the country by July - as requested by government - would be "operationally feasible." However, the safety of civilians under threat from militias and criminals would suffer from the pullout.

"Violence against civilians is increasingly perpetrated by criminal elements in North and South Kivu [provinces], which points to the need for an enhanced police presence to secure public order," said MONUC leader Alan Doss.

He noted that a "large number of internally displaced persons, high levels of sexual violence against women and attacks on humanitarian workers" in the Kivus and parts of Orientale province were of "deep concern" to MONUC. However, close to 1 million displaced had already returned home and the economic tempo in several territories of the Kivus has picked up, Mr Doss added.

The national army, backed by MONUC peacekeepers, had been fighting mainly Rwandan Hutu rebels and a collection of other insurgent groups in the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu. MONUC, which has been in Congo Kinshasa since 1999, is working to restore order across the vast country, but tensions persist in the east and north-east.

"MONUC is in the process of preparing a drawdown of troops, which will begin by 30 June," Mr Doss confirmed today. The date had been recommended by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, after pressure from the Congolese President, Joseph Kabila.

The current plan includes withdrawing 2,000 UN troops from the 20,000-strong peacekeeping force by June. The UN Security Council is to travel on an official visit to Congo on Friday to plan for the withdrawal. MONUC and Congolese authorities further foresee a joint review the security situation in September and again in March next year, "to plan subsequent phases," according to Mr Doss.

The UN originally did have no plans to scale down its Congolese operations this year given the continued conflict in eastern and north-eastern DRC. But following the request from President Kabila, MONUC and the UN Secretary-General agree, at least in public, that a gradual withdrawal of blue helmets is a good option.

Mr Ki-moon in a recent report even said that, despite continued violence and human rights abuses, "Congolese authorities have made progress in restoring a measure of stability over much of the country."

However, the UN Security Council remains sceptical about a pullout of MONUC. Council members initially had planned a visit to the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda starting on Friday. But they will now only visit the DRC, "given the pressing agenda" in that country. As MONUC's mandate expires at the end of the month, the Security Council wants to make sure Kinshasa authorities accept a slow pullout of the peacekeepers.

UN: Congo Army Still Undisciplined

VOA

Fighting for control of the capital of Congo's Equateur province has revived concerns about the strength of Kinshasa's army at a time when United Nations peacekeepers will start withdrawing in June. President Joseph Kabila's government says its troops will be ready by the time all UN soldiers are gone next year.

Ethnic Enyele rebels surprised government troops and U.N. peacekeepers with their attack on Mbandaka. They briefly held the governor's office and the airport before last week's joint counter-attack drove them back into the bush.

But the speed with which this violence has grown from a dispute over local fishing rights to a series of ambushes and this strike on Mbandaka shows the fragile state of Congolese security, even outside the more volatile eastern Kivu regions.

U.N. peacekeepers in Kivu are expected to remain at least through next year. But troops in the west are expected to begin pulling out by June, when Congo celebrates 50 years of independence from Belgian colonialism.

The U.N. Secretary General's Deputy Special Representative for Congo, Leila Zerrougui, says the government has made clear the withdrawal of the MONUC peacekeeping force will remain on schedule.

Zerrougui says she is not saying the situation in Congo does not require the continuing presence of U.N. peacekeepers, but MONUC cannot deploy if the government refuses their presence.

With nearly 22,000 troops this is the biggest U.N. peacekeeping mission. It has played a central role in restoring order in Congo, following two wars between 1998 and 2003 that resulted in the deaths of at least one-million people.

But Congolese Information Minister Lambert Mende says MONUC troops in Mbandaka failed to protect civilians during this month's fighting. He says the rebel attack should not delay MONUC's withdrawal because Congo's army will be ready to handle its own security when the last U.N. soldiers leave.

Mende says the armed forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are recovering, little by little, their ability to take responsibility for defending the country, like a traditional army. An army that will be ready and operational in a year, a year and half from now - the time given U.N. peacekeepers to make their gradual withdrawal.

The head of MONUC peacekeepers, Alan Doss, told the Security Council this week that there remain substantial structural shortfalls in a force drawn from both the remnants of the army of long-time dictator Mobutu Sese Seko and various militias who fought against Mobutu.

"Discipline is likely to remain a constant concern as long as the structural problems of the Congolese Army are not fully resolved, including persistent delays in the payment of salaries, insufficient supplies and a very low level of training of many troops, especially those who have been integrated from the various armed groups," said Doss.

Doss says Congo's army has taken some important measures to improve discipline as the number of soldiers prosecuted for crimes against civilians has increased substantially.

But he says military impunity is still an area that needs significant improvement as part of overall efforts to reform Congo's security sector.

Red Cross staff seized in DR Congo

Al Jazeera

Eight aid workers have been abducted by armed men in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the International Committee of the Red Cross has said.

The seven Congolese and one Swiss national were seized on Friday near the town of Fizi in South Kivu province.

Red Cross officials said that the abduction had been staged by members of the Mai Mai Yakutumba militia.

"The ICRC has been able to get in touch with some of our colleagues after the incident," Marcal Izard, the Red Cross spokesman, told reporters in Geneva.

He declined to say whether the Red Cross had been in contact with the abductors.

The Swiss foreign ministry said it was aware of the situation and was in touch with the Red Cross and Congolese authorities.

'Humanitarian nature'

The Red Cross has several offices in South Kivu, which like much of eastern DR Congo has been wracked by violence since the 1994 genocide in neighboring Rwanda spilled across the border.

"It is in order to protect and assist armed-conflict victims that we have been carrying out our activities in the area," Franz Rauchenstein, the head of the ICRC's mission in DR Congo, said.

"We continue to insist that the strictly neutral, impartial and humanitarian nature of our work be recognised, and that our colleagues be able to return to their loved ones soon."

The Mai Mai group, which was formed to resist Rwandan Hutu forces who fled into DR Congo after the genocide, controls its own territory in the region.

The region has been the scene of violent clashes which have resulted in the displacement of thousands of civilians in recent months.

Staff of the aid group have previously been targeted for abduction in other conflict regions across the world.

Three foreign Red Cross workers were abducted in the Philippines last year and French staff members were seized in Chad and Sudan. All have since been released.

Central Africa: Army Rescues Nine Women in Central African Republic

The New Vision

Kampala — The army has rescued nine women abducted by the Lord's Resistant Army (LRA) in the ongoing operations against the rebels in the Central African Republic (CAR).

The women included Ugandans, Congolese and Central Africans, according to a statement issued by the defence ministry spokesperson, Lt. Col. Felix Kulayigye.

"In another harvest also in Central Africa, a group that had been terrorizing people in CAR was hit yesterday, and a 15-year old girl was rescued. Seven terrorists were killed as a result. We shall not rest until we rid the great lakes region of these marauding, merciless criminals," Kulayigye stated yesterday.

As the army announced its achievements on the war front, the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) renewed its call to pursue peaceful means to end the conflict.

"Since 1997, the initiative has been urging the conflicting parties to engage in dialogue to resolve the conflict between the Government and the LRA," ARLPI wrote.

However, the Gulu Resident district commissioner, Col. Walter Ochora, said the North needed not "peace awards" but "actual peace" as foundation for development.

"Kony did not go out of Northern Uganda because of prayers. It was because of military action, and prayers just accompanied him," he said.

Ochora added that the peace talks were over and they wanted implementation of the draft agreement and development programmes.

Ochora, who was a key figure in the Juba peace negotiations, said while the Government was willing to talk peace, rebel leader Joseph Kony was playing mind games.

"You can only talk to someone who has willingness to talk. I have told people several times that Kony cannot sign a peace agreement because his group is a cult," Ochora noted.

Kony thrice kept peace mediators waiting at the Sudan and the DR Congo border to sign the peace agreement in vain.

On December 14, 2008 a joint military offensive was launched by Uganda, the DR Congo and South Sudan on LRA bases in Garamba. Kony escaped but many of his fighters were either killed or captured.

3. Human Rights/ Social Issues

Congo-Kinshasa: Conflict-Related Rape the Focus of UN Official's Visit

UN News Service

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict Margot Wallström is on her first tour since her appointment, conducting a week-long visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) where both rebels and the national army have been accused of mass rape.

Ms. Wallström, who was appointed in February, will go to ground zero of the alleged conflict-related sexual violence in the vast country, the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu where more than 8,000 women were raped by warring factions last year, according to UN Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates.

Sexual violence is not exclusively African and even less so Congolese but "a result of conflicts and war and the absence of peace in the DRC," she said. "It is possible to fight sexual violence and find solutions; we must fight against impunity."

Although the mainly ethnic Hutu rebel militia, known as the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR) - who have been operating in the Kivus since the 1994 Rwandan genocide - are thought to be responsible for most of the rapes, members of the national army are also guilty of sexual abuse in North and South Kivu provinces, according to UN experts.

In a newspaper column last month, Mr. Wallström said sexual violence during conflicts was all too often downplayed and treated as part of local cultural traditions instead of being viewed as a war crime.

Congo-Kinshasa: New Report Shows Shocking Pattern of Rape in Eastern Congo

Oxfam International (Oxford)
Press release

Survey reveals that sixty percent of rape victims gang raped, more than half in their own homes, appalling increase in number of civilian rapists.

An extensive study of rape victims in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) commissioned by Oxfam and conducted by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, shows that 60 percent of rape victims surveyed were gang raped by armed men and more than half of assaults took place in the supposed safety of the family home at night, often in the presence of the victim's husband and children.

While the majority of rapists were either soldiers or militiamen, the report also shows a shocking 17-fold increase in rapes carried out by civilians between 2004 and 2008.

The report, "Now, the world is without me", is based on the study by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, which analyzed information collected from 4,311 female rape victims who were treated in Panzi hospital in South Kivu Province over a four-year period.

Oxfam International

The report found that the incidence of rape spiked during military activities. Given the ongoing offensives against militia groups in eastern Congo, the report has real relevance for the situation in DRC today. Over 5,000 people were raped in South Kivu in 2009, according to the UN. The report comes out ahead of the UN Security Council visit to DRC this weekend, with the council set to renew the UN peacekeepers mandate in May.

Krista Riddley, Oxfam's Director of Humanitarian Policy, said:

"Rape of this scale and brutality is scandalous. This is a wake-up call at a time when plans are being discussed for UN peacekeepers to leave the country. The situation is not secure if a woman can't even sleep safely in her own bed at night. The report shows when and where women are attacked, and why peacekeepers must continue to play a vital role in creating security while the Congolese government builds up its own capacity to keep civilians from harm."

The study shows that 56 percent of assaults were carried out in the family home by armed men, while 16 percent took place in fields and almost 15 percent in the forest. Fifty-seven percent of assaults were carried out at night. Sexual slavery was also reported, affecting 12 percent of the women in the sample, with some women being held captive for years.

Stigma delays treatment

The report also offers insights into the stigma facing women within their families after rape and the problems they face getting medical care. Less than one percent of women

came to Panzi hospital with their husbands and nine percent had been abandoned by their spouse. One in three women came alone.

This stigma leads to delays in seeking treatment, with only 12 percent of the women coming to Panzi within a month of the assault. Very few women came for treatment in time to prevent HIV infection. Over 50 percent of women waited more than a year before seeking treatment, with a significant number waiting more than three years.

Krista Riddley from Oxfam said:

"Panzi is the only hospital of its kind in South Kivu, which is home to some 5 million people. Many women from rural areas cannot make the journey and often die from the complications associated with brutal rape. Rich country donors together with the Congolese government need to radically increase the medical services available for survivors of sexual violence in Congo's remote towns and villages. Every woman should be able to get the treatment she needs."

The research found that fewer than one percent of rapes were perpetrated by civilians in 2004. By 2008, that proportion had gone up to 38 percent.

Few rapists are prosecuted

Susan Bartels, the study's lead researcher from the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, said, "This study confirms what has only been reported anecdotally until now: sexual violence has become more normal in civilian life. The scale of rape over Congo's years of war has made this crime seem more acceptable. Although Congo has one of the most progressive laws on rape in Africa, few rapists are prosecuted. The law must be enforced and justice put within reach of survivors."

The report calls on the Congolese government and the international community to:

Increase provision of medical care for survivors of sexual violence, particularly in rural areas. The easier it is to get help locally, the more likely women will be to get timely support for HIV and the more able they will be to manage the risk of others finding out. Stigma remains a significant barrier to accessing care following sexual violence.

Ensure that the protection provided by the UN peacekeepers and Congolese security services is tailored to local realities. The peacekeepers and security services need to consult with the local community to provide innovative solutions, such as early warning systems and night patrols to help meet their needs. This is happening in some areas and needs to be rolled out more systematically to respond to the threats this report highlights.

Reform the Congolese security sector and justice system to ensure that there is zero tolerance for rape, whether it is committed by civilians, militiamen, or soldiers.

Rwanda: CRS Launches Rwf 9 Billion Food Security Project

The New Times

A Rwf 9bn (US\$16m) project that aims to tackle food insecurity among people living with HIV/AIDS and orphans from nine districts was launched yesterday.

The project is the second phase of the Catholic Relief Services' (CRS) Food and Nutritional Interventions Project (Ibyiringiro).

The USAID funded community-based project will seek to ensure that targeted vulnerable groups improve their livelihoods.

"Ibyiringiro will support cooperatives of people living with HIV by providing high quality services to their members, improve the nutritional status of HIV positive infants and also enrol HIV infected mothers in programs that aim to prevent mother-to-child transmissions," the project coordinator, Rafaramalala Volanarisoa, told The New Times.

She said that the project will also provide refresher training to community health workers on nutrition and palliative care and train household members on caring for HIV positive children.

"We have paid health insurance for 3,765 beneficiaries and also identified 3,098 more vulnerable homesteads in the nine districts that will need our assistance. On top of that, we have trained 183 homesteads on kitchen gardening," Rafaramalala said.

Rafaramalala added that CRS works hand-in-hand with the Ministry of Health and its food partners to distribute food aid to the food insecure districts of Rwanda as part of the endeavour to attain Rwanda's Vision 2020 target.

"Our main objective is to reach out to the most vulnerable people in the HIV affected families so that we can provide them with nutritional necessities, train them on life skills and provide them with a financial start-up in order to improve their lives," Rafaramalala said.

4. US-Africa

Rwanda: Kagame Receives U.S. Environmental Group

The New Times

Urugwiro Village — Conservation International (CI), an American environmental organization, is set to enter into a partnership with Rwanda which will focus on improving people's lives through conserving nature.

A delegation from the Arlington-Virginia based non-profit group currently in the country, yesterday paid a courtesy call on President Paul Kagame at Urugwiro Village where they held discussions on the partnership.

Speaking to the press shortly after the talks, Peter Seligmann, the organisation's CEO and Board Chairman, observed that Rwanda is one of the few countries that have a clearly defined 'green development' plan, which compelled the organisation to work with the country.

"Our partnership will focus on supporting human wellbeing by restoring and maintaining ecosystems and nature. People need nature to thrive--that is to have water security, climate security and food security," Seligmann said.

He noted that the partnership will focus on identifying areas of the environment where Rwandans can benefit from nature through sustainable 'green planning' especially in the area of agriculture, focussing on a number of food and cash crops.

Seligmann said that the organisation will work with Rwanda on the already existing 'green' programmes the government has already put in place as part of the long term plan to promote environmentally friendly sustainable economic growth.

Following the Copenhagen Climate Change summit, there has been growing international interest to support the emergence of climate resilient economic growth.

It is under this framework that CI came to propose to Rwanda possible ways of contributing towards the country's long term visionary environment conscious-national development plan.

According to Caroline Kayonga, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Natural Resources, Environment and Lands, the organisation which works with a number of developed countries and global organisation on environmental issues, chose Rwanda because it has taken the green development path.

"They looked for a country which has already integrated the green concept in its development plans and we were picked out of Africa. In Asia they are working with Singapore,"

"So we have started talks with them to identify a number of areas where they can partner with us, and from there, we will develop a model which other countries can follow," Kayonga said.

Fisk Johnson, the CEO of S.C Johnson & Sons, Inc, the largest purchaser of Pyrethrum in the world, who is also a Board member of CI, also expressed the company's interest to increase pyrethrum purchases from Rwanda and also help farmers improve farming methods.

The company which has been working in Rwanda since last year, is also helping farmers in areas where pyrethrum is grown in terms of agriculture extensions service, education as well as medical services.

"This year, we hope to make about two percent of our worldwide purchases of pyrethrum from Rwanda and we want to increase that figure considerably over the next 5 years. We actually launched a product in the US a couple of month ago, based on Rwandan pyrethrum and we are very excited by our presence in Rwanda," Johnson said.

5. Pan Africa

CEEAC parliament opened in Malabo

Afrol News

The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS, or CEEAC in its French acronym) celebrated the opening of its new regional parliament in Malabo, the Equatoguinean capital, with the presence of all presidents of the Central African region.

President Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of the host nation, Equatorial Guinea, received visiting state leaders and led the large inauguration festivities. "The integration of our countries should presume an African renaissance," President Obiang said in his inauguration speech yesterday.

The festivities in Malabo had already started on Wednesday with the arrival of most state leaders of the Central African region. President Obiang received Chad's President Idriss Déby, Gabon's President Ali Bongo, Congo Brazzaville President Denis Sassou Nguesso and Central African Republic President François Bozizé at the Malabo airport on Wednesday.

Cameroonian President Paul Biya and São Tomé and Príncipe's President Fradique de Menezes arrived yesterday, with the latter only present as observer to the CEEAC event.

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) President Joseph Kabila did not participate in the Malabo event, as the DRC is turning its focus away from the CEEAC and towards the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which also has a parliament in South Africa.

The formal inauguration of the CEEAC parliament was celebrated yesterday, with hundreds of official participants from member countries. The newly appointed parliamentarians were shown their new working place.

Pierre Ngolo, President of the new CEEAC parliament, held a keynote speech at the ceremony, the CEEAC parliamentarians that "it is you that will be the

President Teodoro Ngeuma Obiang delivering his inauguration speech in the CEEAC parliament in Malabo, flanked by Central African heads of state

Factors charged with achieving the true objectives of this institution, to help resolving the problems of the CEEAC zone in a peaceful manner."

Equatoguinean President Obiang welcomed the parliamentarians, describing the opening of the regional parliament as a "historic event". He also thanked his colleagues for granting Equatorial Guinea the opportunity to house this institution and to "take such an important responsibility."

"This is a very important occasion for my nation," said Mr Obiang. He promised to offer all possible assistance to CEEAC parliamentarians in their "work to consolidate democracy, dialogue and tolerance for the sake of our nations and to develop our activities in total transparency."

Congolese President Sassou Nguesso, the current leader of the rotating CEEAC presidency, in his speech said that "the opening of the common parliament is a result of our expressed joint willingness towards this institution." He declared that the goal of the CEEAC integration and cooperation was that all countries in the region should be "emerging economies by 2025."

With the opening of the CEEAC parliament, the Central African region takes one step closer to regional integration. CEEAC has however been considered a much looser cooperation area than the more established SADC, East Africa's EAC and West Africa's ECOWAS, with a greater emphasis on symbolic institutions and less emphasis on content or results.

6. Economy and Energy

Gabon striking workers unmoved by govt call

Afrol news

Workers in the Gabon oil-industry have continued in the second day with their strike, despite a call by government for negotiations. Unions demand an end to discrimination of Gabonese labor.

The Gabonese workers started the mass action yesterday complaining mainly of expatriate workers being given preference by oil companies, over the locals.

The workers have also claimed that there are enough local workers who are capable and skilled enough to handle some of the positions that are being offered preferably only to foreigners at high costs for the industry.

The labour union spokesperson was quoted in the national radio in Libreville saying that the strike had affected all parts of the country, with other reports also pointing out that since yesterday, oil production has been greatly affected in Gabon at large.

Gabonese oil workers have rather high salaries compared to colleagues in most other African countries. However, the costs of living in Gabon are sky-high as the country's economy has been driven by oil production for decades, and the many expatriates in Gabon have strongly contributed to imports and inflation.

Gabon is one of Africa's main oil producers alongside other producers such as Nigeria, Angola, Sudan, Equatorial Guinea and Congo Brazzaville, with an estimated production of over 230 barrels per day of crude.

Oil production in Gabon peaked in the 1990s, but is still substantial. Gabon is still attracting major exploration investments and new oil discoveries are regularly made onshore and offshore, mostly of minor size however.

Gabonese authorities, who faced a liquidity crisis four years ago and turned to the IMF for help and advice, have tried to lessen the country's dependence on oil over the last decade. But Gabon still heavily depends on its oil production, which is now halted by the strike.

7. Elections and Governness

Burundi Launches Ambitious Infrastructure Development Plan

VOA

Recent clashes between opposition and government supporters in Burundi have many worried that the upcoming elections could destabilize the country. An international human rights organization says that Burundian Police must take action or risk the legitimacy of the poll.

Tensions are high in Burundi after a confrontation between supporters of Burundi's main opposition party, The National Forces of Liberation or FNL, and the ruling party last week.

The incident took place in the northwestern village of Kinama, where the two sides apparently clashed at an FNL event. According to witnesses a grenade was thrown by a member of the ruling party's youth league and despite the presence of police and administrative officials, no effort was made to stop the violence.

The incident is the latest in an increasing number of clashes between Burundi's many political parties during the lead up to the country's national elections.

The violence is often carried out by members of the parties' youth wings, which analysts say are often armed and well organized for the purpose of confrontation. The groups have been growing in recent years, and could be a major destabilizing factor during the elections.

A recent statement released by New York-based Human Rights Watch said that violence committed by the youth groups is rarely investigated and perpetrators are never held accountable.

A researcher for Human Rights Watch in Burundi, Neela Ghoshal, says that if the police don't undertake serious measures to reign in the youth groups, more violence can be expected.

"Our concern is that the authorities aren't doing enough to put an end to this kind of violence and to hold individual perpetrators accountable," said Neela Ghoshal. "If the youth movements from the opposition parties feel that the forces of order aren't there to protect them, they are going to take security into their own hands. And if the ruling party feel that they can act in impunity, they will also use violence to accomplish political ends."

But many analysts also question the loyalty of the police.

Many policemen are former rebel soldiers who fought the government of Burundi in a civil war which ended in 2005. The war claimed the lives of over 300,000 Burundians and despite its transition to democracy, the country is still fragile.

Many rebel leaders during the war have since formed political parties. The rebel soldiers were integrated into the armed forces of Burundi after the war, but many remain loyal to their political leaders.

The elections will cap a 5 year transition to democracy, initiated by the peace agreements which ended the civil war. Burundians will vote in a series of local and national elections which will run from May to September.

According to Ghoshal, the Government of Burundi must ensure that justice is equitably enforced if the upcoming elections are to maintain credibility. But many analysts fear that the recovering nation will once again be plunged into violence when it heads to the polls.