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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 - Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Events of 2015

The DRC is extraordinarily multicultural, with as many as 250 ethnic groups and up to 700 distinct languages or dialects across its vast territory. As elsewhere, in the DRC regional and ethnic identities have frequently been mobilized for political ends. Consequently, while the presidential elections currently scheduled for November 2016 could provide an opportunity for the first peaceful democratic transfer in the DRC's history, they could also pose significant risks for the country's minorities and indigenous peoples. Incumbent Joseph Kabila is constitutionally barred from seeking a third consecutive term, but opposition parties and some civil society groups warn that he may try to retain power illegitimately, for instance by delaying the polls. Already, some Kabila opponents have reportedly been subjected to intimidation, arbitrary arrest and summary execution, while opposition protests have at times been met with disproportionate use of force by security forces as well as members of the youth league of Kabila's party.

The continued proliferation of militias has created chaos in some areas of the country, uprooting entire communities. As of the end of 2015, there were approximately 1.5 million internally displaced people and another 500,000 stranded in neighbouring countries as refugees. Since the outbreak of conflict in the Great Lakes region in the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, eastern DRC has been particularly unstable. Here, up to 70 armed groups – many of them reportedly recruiting along ethnic lines among the highly diverse population – fight for control of lucrative natural resources such as gold, tin, tungsten and tantalum, vital to the electronics industry.

DRC and UN military efforts to combat the largest armed groups remaining after the 2013 dismantling of the M23 group continue. Despite the arrest in April of the leader of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the group has continued to carry out attacks and massacres around Beni, North Kivu. DRC military efforts are also ongoing against the predominantly Hutu Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), responsible for numerous human rights abuses against civilians, particularly those belonging to ethnic groups considered as rivals of Hutus.

Manono and Nyunzu territories in the eastern Katanga province saw continuing violence between ethnic Luba, a majority Bantu group, and members of the Batwa indigenous, traditionally hunter-

gatherer people. Both sides were accused of attacking civilians. The conflict is rooted in social inequalities between the historically marginalized Batwa – their culture and way of life under increasing pressure due to deforestation and the expansion of agricultural lands – and the more privileged Bantu.

The traditional forest homes of eastern DRC's indigenous hunter-gatherers have in several cases been named World Heritage Sites; this is the case, for instance, for Bambuti / Mbuti peoples in and around the Okapi Wildlife Reserve and Batwa peoples in Virunga and Kahuzi-Biega National Parks. While indigenous peoples' rights should be met along with the demands of environmental management, conservation programmes have often had a negative impact on communities in these areas. For Batwa in Kahuzi-Biega, since its designation as a national forest in the 1960s, the community has been evicted from much of their ancestral lands, bringing an end to traditional hunting practices and resulting in malnourishment, poor health and deep poverty. With the outbreak of conflict in 1994 their situation became even more precarious and they were subjected to attack by armed groups in and outside their traditional forest homes.

These pressures have only intensified with the continued deterioration in security in many areas and the depredations of armed poachers. Over the last two decades all five of the DRC's World Heritage Site national parks – four of which are in eastern DRC – have been inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger, due in part to conflict-induced mass displacement of people into the park and their impact on wildlife. During 2015, the parks continued to face militia attacks on rangers and poaching by armed groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army. The illegal trade in ivory and other animal parts has sustained considerable violence in forest areas, placing their indigenous inhabitants at risk not only from armed groups but also forest rangers. Groups concerned with indigenous peoples' rights have continued to insist, however, that conservation and wildlife protection efforts must not in any way be used to suppress the legitimate hunting and other activities of indigenous peoples.

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