



PRESS RELEASE

Organized Crime in Wildlife, Gold and Timber, Worth Over One Billion USD, Further Fuels Conflict in Eastern DR Congo — UN Report

Nairobi, 16 April 2015 - Organized crime and the illegal trade in natural resources continues to increasingly fuel the conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), according to a new report from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and partners.

The Government of DRC, supported by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) – the largest UN peacekeeping mission with 20,000 uniformed personnel – is confronting not only a political insurgency but an increasing number of illegal operations conducted by militarized criminal groups with transnational links involved in large-scale smuggling and laundering of natural resources.

Every year gold, minerals, timber, charcoal and wildlife products such as ivory, valued between US\$ 0.7-1.3 billion annually, are exploited and smuggled illegally out of the conflict zone and surrounding areas in eastern DRC. Experts estimate that 10-30 per cent of this illegal trade (around US\$ 72-426 million per annum) goes to transnational organized criminal networks based outside eastern DRC. Around 98 per cent of the *net* profit from illegal natural resource exploitation - particularly gold, charcoal and timber - goes to transnational organized criminal networks operating in and outside DRC.

In contrast, DRC based armed groups retain only around two per cent - equivalent to US\$ 13.2 million per annum - of the *net* profits from illegal smuggling. This income represents the basic subsistence cost for at least 8,000 armed fighters per year, and enables defeated or disarmed groups to continuously resurface and destabilize the region. There is evidence that revenues from such operations finance at least 25 armed groups that continue to destabilize the peace and security of eastern DRC.

The report, jointly produced by UNEP-MONUSCO-OSESG (Office of the Special Envoy for Great Lakes Region), relies on inputs from a high number of experts, including the UN Office for Drugs and Crime, INTERPOL, the UN Group of Experts on the DRC, DRC government agencies and NGOs.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UNEP, said: "There is no room for doubt: wildlife and forest crime is serious and calls for an equally serious response. In addition to the breach of the international rule of law and the impact on peace and security, environmental crime robs countries of revenues that could have been spent on sustainable development and the eradication of poverty."

"In order to strengthen the environmental rule of law, we need to implement existing international, regional and national commitments, which requires, among other things, updating and strengthening national legislation,

building capacity, strengthening enforcement, building consumer awareness and enhancing international cooperation and intelligence gathering across the supply chain to track and disrupt illegal operations," he added.

Martin Kobler, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and head of MONUSCO, said, "These resources lost to criminal gangs and fuelling the conflict could have been used to build schools, roads, hospitals and a future for the Congolese people."

"Imagine if we could spend hundreds of millions of dollars of the lost revenues stolen by criminal gangs in eastern DRC instead to pay teachers, doctors and promote business opportunities and tourism? We must turn gold into taxes and taxes to development for a prosperous future," he added.

The UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Great Lakes, Said Djinnit underscores in his Roadmap (2015-2017), the need to undercut the economic lifeline of armed groups. "The illegal exploitation of natural resources is sustaining negative forces, perpetuating the instability and conflict in eastern DRC," stated Said Djinnit.

"Yet, these natural resources should be drivers of inclusive sustainable development and the transformation of the DRC and Great Lakes region at large. Efforts to address these transnational organized criminal groups' activities require a regional approach including forward-looking solutions of gradual replacement of the illegal charcoal trade, livelihood solutions to miners and farmers, harmonization of tax systems and transparent sharing of revenues," added Special Envoy Djinnit.

The conflict in eastern DRC, which has cost the lives of several million people, has continued for nearly two decades. The region also holds some of the richest natural resources and wildlife, including the critically endangered mountain gorillas, targeted by criminal groups as retaliation for park rangers interfering with the illegal charcoal trade inside the Virunga National Park.

The report warns that transnational organized criminal networks "divide and rule" armed groups in eastern DRC to prevent any single armed group from achieving a dominant role and potentially interfering with illegal exploitation run by transnational criminal networks.

The report points to an increased awareness of, and response to, the growing threat of the involvement of organized crime and calls for further concerted action, and makes recommendations aimed at strengthening action against the organized criminal networks profiting from the trade, including on MONUSCO's mandate.

Other recommendations from the report:

- The experts recommend that MONUSCO strengthens its information and analysis capacity, with a view to undercutting the lifelines of armed groups with links to transnational criminal networks benefiting from illicit natural resource exploitation in eastern DRC;
- Strengthen, in a targeted manner, the capacity of the Congolese national police and the justice system to investigate and prosecute environmental crime;
- Strengthen the existing cooperation between MONUSCO and national authorities, particularly the Congolese Wildlife Authority (ICCN), to safeguard protected areas and World Heritage Sites from illegal natural resources exploitation and their use as 'safe havens' by armed groups;
- Strengthen regional cooperation on transnational organized crime through information sharing and joint plans with the UN Police (UNPOL), INTERPOL, UNODC, the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the OSESG for the Great Lakes Region, the UN Group of Experts on the DRC, and prosecutors;
- Continued advocacy for legal and fiscal reforms to further formalize natural resources exploitation, particularly of artisanal gold mining, artisanal timber logging and charcoal production, in coordination with bilateral and multilateral development partners;

Responses So Far

Some of the findings from the report were presented in the United Nations Security Council on 19 March this year. On 26 March 2015, the Security Council passed resolution S/RES/2211 renewing for 12 months the mandate of the United Nations peacekeeping mission in the DRC, and endorsing recommendations made in the Secretary-General's report on the strategic review of the mission.

The Security Council demanded that, "the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Lord Resistance Army (LRA), and all other armed groups cease immediately all forms of violence and other destabilizing activities, including the exploitation of natural resources and that their members immediately and permanently disband, lay down their arms and release children from their ranks."

The UN Security Council furthermore authorized MONUSCO to carry out targeted offensive operations, either unilaterally or jointly, with the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC).

Significantly, this enables the Mission to use the necessary force to prevent criminal armed groups from benefitting from any exploitation of natural resources, and hence, address the root causes of the conflict.

For more information, please contact:

Shereen Zorba, Head of News and Media, UNEP

+254 788 526000, Shereen.Zorba@unep.org

Charles Bambara, Director, Public Information Division, MONUSCO (Kinshasa, DRC)

Tel +243 81 890 5202 or +243 99 706 8876, bambara@un.org

Penangnini Toure, Public Information Officer, O/SESG

+254 715 703 417, tourep@un.org