Pursuing Peace in the Great Lakes Region of Africa: A New “Framework of Hope” and the Critical Role for Women Within It

Melanne Verveer, Mayesha Alam and Roslyn Warren
August 2013

Despite the largest UN peacekeeping force and millions of dollars in resources dedicated to bringing peace to the region, violence continues to plague the people of eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The roots of the conflict lay in the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, during which Hutu genocidaires slaughtered some 800,000 Tutsis and Tutsi sympathizers with machetes in only 100 days. After the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) led by current-Rwandan President Paul Kagame gained control of the country, the remaining Hutu extremists fled across the porous Rwanda/DRC border, hiding and regrouping among those displaced by the genocide in UN-supported refugee camps. Over the last two decades, eastern DRC’s permeable borders, abundant resources, vast and underdeveloped territorial expanse, and volatile political history has made the region home to the deadliest conflict since World War II.

Fighting has intensified yet again in eastern DRC. This time it is being led by the March 23 Movement (M23) rebel group against the government. Women and girls remain chief among those severely affected. Violence has become the norm, the conflict rages on and sexual and gender-based violence is pervasive.

In March 2013, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon appointed former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, to serve as his Special Envoy to the Great Lakes Region. Her efforts, which include a reinvigorated attempt to foster peace between the warring factions and bring security, stability, and justice to the region, place special emphasis on including women as part of the processes. This brief describes the new “Framework of Hope,” discusses ongoing challenges and provides some recommendations to move the process to a cessation of hostilities and eventually a sustainable peace.

Implementing “A Framework of Hope”

Although the regionally led Kampala Peace Talks hosted by Uganda, between the government of the DRC and M23, have stalled, the UN has shown renewed commitment to peace in the region through the
appointment of Mary Robinson, who was first female President of Ireland and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, as the UN Special Envoy to the Great Lakes Region. To this new role, Robinson brings a lifelong dedication to fostering peace, security, and respect for human rights. Her record of defending human rights and conflict resolution, both at home and on the global stage, are likely to shape her priorities and strategy as she stewards the Great Lakes Region’s pursuit of peace. Moreover, Robinson’s reputation in the region will aid her efforts. She was the first foreign head of state to visit Rwanda after the 1994 genocide. In her third visit to Rwanda in March 1997, just three years after the genocide, she participated in a pan-African women’s conference, dedicated to bolstering the now-enhanced role of women in Rwanda’s reconstruction and development. Robinson’s demonstrated interest in and caring for the Great Lakes adds to her credibility, not only with the local authorities she must corral but also among the citizens and civil society organizations of the region.

Her vision for peace combines the top-down Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, signed by 11 heads of state in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in February 2013, with bottom-up, civil society engagement. As the first woman ever appointed to the Special Envoy position, Robinson feels a responsibility to “do it differently.” Through this “Framework of Hope,” she promises, “To work both top down with Heads of State of the 11 countries, and the four institutions that are guarantors of the Framework...and bottom-up with the peoples of the Region...for whom this framework has to be meaningful.” As a central component of this effort, Robinson has made clear that one of her priorities will be to engage women leaders in the peace process and connect their existing Track II efforts to the official negotiations. This is an important step, not only because it strengthens the ability of women to participate in the renewed peace process but also because Robinson’s recognition and support adds credibility to women who are eager to participate but have been relegated to the sidelines by the dominant stakeholders to the conflict. As a result, women have an unprecedented platform through which to signal to armed groups, politicians, and regional powers, alike, that they are not merely victims in this protracted conflict but also willing, and capable, of being agents of change.

In July of this year, Robinson, with the help of Benita Diop, Senegalese peace activist and founder of Femmes Africa Solidarité, and the International Conference for the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), convened 100 women in Bujumbura, Burundi to hear from women and integrate principles from UNSCR 1325 into the peace process. In a traditionally heretofore all-male process, the Bujumbura meetings and the outcome...
declaration represent the actualization of, what should not be, but is in fact, a revolutionary idea. Robinson points:

*In real time these women were able to examine and come up with suggestions on indicators on violence against women, on reconstructing women’s bodies, on women participating at the table…both in relation to national benchmarks for the DRC and the regional benchmarks.*

Women remain integral to building sustainable peace for the region and are entitled to the opportunity to participate because they represent half the affected population and have endured the worst of the conflict’s violence.

Rape as a Weapon of War

As the conflict in eastern DRC rages on, government soldiers and rebels alike brutally assault civilians, employing rape as a weapon of war. Official UN figures reveal that the number of reported cases of sexual violence in North Kivu alone reached 7,075 in 2012, up from 4,689 in 2011. It is prudent to remember that these figures represent only reported cases in a single province of the DRC and as a result do not provide a complete geographic account. Reported figures also exclude rapes and sexual assaults that go unreported, a problem that is common and multifaceted, stemming in large part from social stigma and fear of retaliatory attacks. On her watch, Robinson demands the world act against those perpetrating these abuses. She asks:

*Why are we not in more shock horror about the daily rapes? A 12 year-old girl raped by three men in uniform! Babies being raped and abused as a form of terrible hatred and warfare! It’s happening everyday and it’s somehow become so routine that we don’t think about it.*

Great Lakes Responsibility and Accountability

Coinciding with Robinson’s appointment and fresh spurts of violence, the UN has decided to bolster its peacekeeping force (MONUSCO) with an offensively-oriented “intervention brigade,” mandated to “confront armed groups…create a stronger deterrent and persuade armed groups to make peace with the state.” The head of the Mission has reissued a zero-tolerance policy on gender-based violence and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations hopes that an expanded mandate will equip...

---


the Mission with adequate resources and power to ensure this pledge. Troop contributing countries include South Africa, Tanzania, and Malawi. More troops, however, is hardly a panacea for peace or even the cessation of violence, especially against civilians. Robinson cautions:

_This force must be conceived...as addressing the broad problem of armed groups not targeting one or the other...[the] intervention brigade has to play a role but play a very careful role...the solution has to be a political solution and a humanitarian one._

In July 2013, immediately preceding Robinson’s meetings with women’s groups in Bujumbura, MONUSCO’s Gender Unit held a “Gender and Media” training workshop for some 100 reporters and representatives from various media outlets in Kinshasa. The training was designed to sensitize journalists “to place gender issues at the center of their daily reporting” in hopes of increasing public awareness on the extent of and need to eradicate sexual violence. This initiative was commendable and a positive sign of civilian-military relations as well as information sharing. However, such gestures hardly represented a disciplined, resourced, and comprehensive effort to institutionalize gender mainstreaming in MONUSCO’s efforts. While recent improvements have resulted in the appointment of nine gender officers who can commit energy, time, and technical expertise towards building a more gender-inclusive peace support operation, the participation of women in MONUSCO remains staggeringly low: only 2.2% of MONUSCO’s military peacekeeping forces are women. Not only does such a low ratio fly in the face of gender equality within the mission, but, according to some experts, it hinders the ability of personnel to fulfill MONUSCO’s protection mandate, especially pertaining to prevention of and response to SGBV.

Furthermore, an increasingly aggressive force will not, on its own, bring peace and stability to the region and could aggravate the conflict. Prosecution of atrocities committed, including crimes of sexual and gender-based violence, remains an imperative for lasting peace. While rejecting impunity and prosecuting rape and other egregious human rights violations demands cross-country and regional cooperation, the government of the DRC must assume a large measure of the responsibility, especially in building capacity in the justice, DDR, and security sector reform arenas. At Robinson’s urging, President Kabila established a national mechanism for oversight.

---

before the international joint UN/World Bank visit to the region. The efficacy of this mechanism, as well as the political will of authorities to adhere to its founding principle, has yet to be tested. To achieve holistic and gender equitable justice, however, women must also actively and directly serve as designers and implementers. As Robinson reminds us, women in the region already engage in justice institutions – as lawyers, magistrates, judges, witnesses, plaintiffs, etc. It will be important to support the work of these individuals while also creating an enabling environment for more women to participate. However, the visibility and presence of women, while necessary, is not sufficient to ensure gender mainstreaming in any future transitional justice and peacebuilding processes. For this reason, Robinson encourages peace proponents to "broaden the whole landscape" to include monitoring and accountability, violence against women and women affected by violence, livelihoods and agriculture, and access to energy to build real foundations for peace.12

**Tying Peace to Development**

The Special Envoy reflected on previous efforts to establish peace, "In the past we have waited until peace was established, and then we come in with development. I don’t think that’s enough."13 On a joint visit to the region in May 2013, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and World Bank President Dr. Jim Yong Kim began incentivizing peace by committing development dollars toward addressing the root causes of the ongoing violence. Instead of waiting for the seeds of the peace framework to sprout, the World Bank, for the first time, is moving to use development as tool to sow peace. In the region, the World Bank pledged $1 billion dollars, in addition to the $1.3 billion it has already committed to the DRC, for improved health and education projects, as well as transnational trade and hydroelectricity programs.14 Ban Ki-moon explained the crux of the new strategy, “For lasting peace we must also provide opportunity.”15 As a result, international, regional, and local stakeholders are hearing that a peace dividend is inseparable from economic growth and stability in the hotbed of this conflict. And, encompassing all these ingredients and intended outcomes, is the participation of women, without whose voices and talents, the process can neither be democratic nor successful.

---


Recommendations for the Way Forward

As a steward of the peace process, Robinson has the very difficult but essential task of building trust between President Kagame, President Kabila, and the other heads of government in the region. Any hopes for a mediated process hinge on this. At the same time, however, Robinson also has the very tall task of taking what she has learned from the civil society groups of the region – especially the women’s groups – and wedge open a communication channel between the citizens and governments of the region. The broken social contract between the citizens of the DRC and their government, for example, seriously inhibits the prospect of a negotiated peace but without the Track I and Track II processes converging – hopefully through Robinson’s guidance and initiative – any sustainable peace agreement is unlikely. Without broad-based consensus, the region is left susceptible to renewed violence. Robinson explains, “This framework needs to be a framework of solidarity and responsibility. The countries have to work together. That is how we will achieve the peace.”

The next meeting of stakeholders will be in September 2013 at the UN General Assembly. Thereafter, Addis Ababa will host the next meeting of African Union heads of state in January 2014. These two dates represent important milestones in implementing the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework that Robinson introduced to not only the Great Lakes Region but also, now, to the world, as the “Framework of Hope.”

---