

INTERVIEW:

Steffen Krüger, Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in DR Congo, in an interview with *KAS International Reports* editorial team.

DR CONGO

CONFLICTS AND UNREST IN THE REGION CAUSE AN INFLUX OF REFUGEES

Why are people leaving the DR Congo?

Emigration from the DR Congo is chiefly linked to the plethora of violent conflicts in the Central African region. The East of the country in particular has seen numerous attacks on local people by rebel groups, criminal gangs, self-styled vigilante groups and even at times by the Congolese security forces. The underlying causes of these conflicts are often extremely complex. They may revolve around access to mining facilities, securing smuggling routes, ethnic conflicts, the proceeds of theft or compulsory levies imposed on the population. In that respect, human rights are being violated to a significant degree. The most seriously affected tend to be groups who have been forced to flee their homes because of conflict and violence.

United Nations' experts estimate that there are currently some 2.6 million people trying to escape conflicts in the DR Congo. Added to this are the 490,000 Congolese refugees who are living in neighbouring Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania and elsewhere. Of course, Congolese people are also leaving their homeland for economic reasons or because of political persecution, many of them heading to South Africa, Angola, Rwanda and Europe.

Many people are fleeing from the DR Congo, while others are seeking refuge there. Who belongs to this second group?

Conflicts and political unrest in neighbouring countries mean that the DR Congo has itself become a destination for refugees. It is currently home to some 120,000 refugees from other African countries. The largest group of refugees is from neighbouring Rwanda, many of whom fled to eastern areas of the DR Congo after the genocide

of 1994. However, the Rwandan government is trying to weed out perpetrators of the genocide from amongst the refugees and supports some rebel groups, which has led to repeated diplomatic and even violent disputes between Rwanda and the DR Congo. The outbreak of unrest in the Central African Republic in December 2012 has also seen thousands of people fleeing to the north of the DR Congo. Smaller groups of refugees have also arrived from countries such as Angola, the Republic of Congo, Burundi and Somalia.



Due to criminal gangs, rebel groups and Congolese security forces in the DR Congo's East several thousand people have been fleeing the region time and again. According to the UN, about 2.6 million people are internally displaced. | Source: Julien Harneis, flickr ©①②.

Who is responsible for looking after the interests of internal displaced persons and those who come to the DR Congo from other countries?

In 2002, the Congolese government set up the National Commission for Refugees (Commission Nationale pour les Réfugiés, CNR). This agency reports to the Ministry of the Interior and Security and is responsible for protecting, registering and housing refugees in the DR Congo. The CNR is also responsible for finding ways of repatriating refugees in the long term. However, the commission is almost

entirely dependent on resources and technical support from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). There are also a number of different international and local aid organisations working in the country, especially in the crisis-hit regions. We should also not underestimate the number of Congolese families who take in fleeing friends and relatives. Their lives may be little better than those of many other refugees, but they are not included in the official refugee statistics.

Will refugees be able to return home at some point?

Whether they are in refugee camps, living with host families or have no form of support, the outlook for many immigrants in the DR Congo is somewhat bleak. High levels of poverty and lack of economic opportunity mean that many refugees simply do not have the means to return home. And many of them have fled from conflicts, so there is a good chance that their houses and lands have now fallen into other hands. In many cases, social and family ties to their home country have also been broken.



The UNHCR provides aid to people in Kigeme in southern Rwanda, who fled from the East of the DR Congo due to ongoing conflicts. | Source: Laura Eldon, Oxfam, flickr ©④©.



The Congolese diaspora: Larger communities of people from the DR Congo live especially in France and Belgium. Occasionally they raise awareness to the political situation in their homeland through demonstrations, as in Paris in 2012. | Source: Jelena Prtoric, flickr ©🇺🇸🇩🇪🇬🇧

There are regular reports in the international media of ethnically-motivated attacks on refugees. How do politics react to such incidents and what civil society initiatives address the issue of xenophobia?

Unfortunately, there has been regular evidence of ethnically-motivated attacks on refugees in DR Congo. The underlying causes range from mundane and often false rumours to historic, deep-rooted enmities amongst ethnic groups. Economic resources (land ownership, access to raw materials or top political appointments, etc.) often play a key role. The CNR and the Congolese security forces have so far been unable to establish an effective policy for protecting the country's refugees. During the election campaign, many politicians even tried to use these ethnic conflicts to their own advantage. The Congolese media are far from independent and often represent the interests of influential individuals. This results in ethnic conflicts being transmitted by the media to other parts of the country.

Having said that, representatives of civil society, especially the Catholic Church and other international organisations, have had some success in mediating between rival groups. We should also mention the important work of church

organisations and NGOs in caring for victims of violence and treating ill refugees.

How has the brain drain affected DR Congo?

Compared to other African countries such as Malawi and Ghana, the problem of highly-skilled workers leaving the DR Congo has been relatively insignificant. The reason for this is that the education system has fallen into such a state of disrepair that very few individuals actually become highly qualified in the first place. In areas such as health-care, education and technical development, the country is extremely reliant on people being educated abroad. For example, there is currently a very large Congolese diaspora in Belgium and France, where Congolese are mostly employed in the private sector. By sending money to their families or investing in their home country, they generally make a positive contribution to the DR Congo.