



Africa Initiative Programme



fewer africa
forum on early warning
and early response –

**Eastern DRC, Women
Building Peace, June 2004.**

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has gone through a twelve-year political transition marked by instability due to internal conflict, poor governance and external pressures that include the hosting of more than two million Rwandan refugees in 1994. Wars between 1996 and 2002 have completely exhausted the country. A tenuous peace process ensues with a transitional national government, comprising members of former rebel movements, based in the capital Kinshasa while high levels of violence remain throughout the eastern part of the country.



Since 1999, the Ituri region has seen an aggravation of violence as with an estimated 50,000 deaths. The conflict, initially an ethnic feud between the Hema and Lendu, has been fueled by external intervention and the massive supply of arms to different communities. The specter of violence has included massacres, random arrests, rapes, torture and unlawful killings. In Ituri, machetes and Kalashnikovs are “weapons of mass destruction.”

Militiamen in Ituri, 2003

The situation in Ituri has improved significantly since the deployment of the French-led, European International Emergency Force (IEMF) in June 2003 and deployment of UN blue helmets in August 2003. However, much work still needs to be done at both the local and national level to consolidate an approach to bring about sustainable peace. As national elections are set to take place in 2005 and there remain an estimated 300,000 former combatants with arms awaiting to be reintegrated into a national army or return to civilian life, local communities will play a pivotal role in reconstructing the social fabric of the country.

Amongst the vital stakeholders in this process of reconstruction and reconciliation, women will have an important part to play.

The Africa Initiative Programme (AIP), a regional based NGO has facilitated dialogue processes between armed and non-armed groups in Ituri since August 2003. Recently, the Director of the organization, Brigitte Mutambala Mapendo, facilitated a roundtable with women from different communities in Bunia, Ituri. Below, Mme. Mapendo shares with us her experience.



"Peace-building has implications for everyone. Women [in DRC] need to have their capacity strengthen so they can be

Brigitte Mutambala Mapendo
Director, Africa Initiative Programme

Brigitte: The women are the losers in the war. In every situation of conflict rape is used as a weapon of war. One group tries to humiliate the other group by 'violating their women'. While women are victims of the conflict [in Congo], many of them are also implicated in the conflict. They have supported the militias from their communities, and have participated in the violence.

What is it that you, AIP, hoped to accomplish with your workshop with women in Ituri?

Brigitte: One of our goals with this workshop was to bring women from different communities, including Hemas and Lendus, together to talk about peace amongst themselves. We wanted to get women on board and engage them in a dialogue process so they can brainstorm and reflect on how to resolve community-level conflicts without the use of arms. We wanted them to reflect on the consequences of choosing the path of resolving the conflict by using arms.

Did women have reservations about participating in such an activity?

Brigitte: At first they had reservations and did not understand what is it we wanted to do.

For them it was just another meeting. There were different expectations of what they thought the workshop would be about. On one hand there were some who wanted to know what are we going to tell them that they do not already know and, on the other side, there were some who expected us to tell them how to solve the conflict.

How did you respond to such attitudes?

Brigitte: We realized we needed to get them to think and to introduce them to new ways of thinking. The first session of workshop, we made them give us an analysis; we then used that analysis to try to show them how stereotypes and culture can bias perceptions and thus, be a cause of the conflict. This is the beginning of the dialogue process.

Did you notice a change in the women's attitudes during or after the workshop that made you think your efforts had a positive impact?

Brigitte: The workshop was an exchange of information, more or less. We were very impressed how people changed from the first day to the last day. Their own perceptions had changed; they began to look at the situation in



an objective way. For one woman, she explained to us how her own community brought young men together to use them to create a "force" for local protection. She said *"As the situation became worse, these "forces" grew into militias. Everybody, even us women, supported forces for protection. We did not think that they would use arms. If we knew, we could have worked from the beginning to stop that type of movement before it went out of control."*

Workshop with Women: April 2004

Another woman came up to me in tears, asking me why we didn't come sooner, that perhaps the fighting would not have reached that level. That is how I know we must continue the work that we have started with local organizations there. This is the obligation that we want to make sure that we fulfill.

What do you think about the efforts of MONUC to help bring about peace?

Brigitte: The efforts of the UN (MONUC) and even the European Multinational Force, when it was here, are a good thing. But we need to think about strengthening the capacity of Iturians so they, themselves, can work for peace when there is nobody there to help them.

In our work, we look for people who want to work for peace from different levels of society; we try to get some different perspectives to think about harmonious coexistence.

What drives you to carry on with the work that you do?

Brigitte: We believe that the people we work with in Ituri, those people can help others in conflict situations. For the last 8 years, our country has been under war. People's thinking has been shaped by rebellion and brutality. We need to find ways to build, not to destroy. *I am glad to be able to add a small stone in that big edifice of peace.*