

# Refugees from The Democratic Republic of Congo: an overview for torture treatment centers

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## Geography of The Democratic Republic of the Congo

Congo is located in the heart of Africa across the equator

### Largest Sub-Saharan country

- Population of over 75.5 million
- Fourth most populous nation in Africa
- High proportion (>90%) of population is Christian, predominantly Roman Catholic
- Young population
  - 0-14 years: 43.5%
- Over 250 different tribal groups



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## Languages/Dialects in Congo



- The DRC is the most populous French-speaking country in the world, ahead of France!
- There are four other languages as the national languages in DRC: **Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili and Tshiluba**
- There are about 200 ethnic languages, and more than 400 dialects

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### Valuable Land

- The DRC is roughly 3 times the size of Texas
- The land is rich in diamonds, gold, copper, cobalt, and zinc, as well as in coltan, used in cell phones and other electronic items, and cassiterite, used in food packaging
- Coffee beans, potatoes, tomatoes, yams, and leeks are among the many crops that grow well in the cool temperatures and fertile soil of the eastern highlands, where many refugees originally lived
- The region has long been exploited for its wealth, with little of the resources going back to the people

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### POLITICS Early Years

- Originally colonised by Belgium
  - 1805-1908 King Leopold of Belgium declared it his "personal property", beginning the brutal exploitation of the Congolese for its riches
  - Belgian parliament – in response to international pressure-took it over as a colony from 1908-1960
- Independence from Belgium and turmoil
  - 30 June 1960 – Led by Lumumba
  - Short-lived: The new leader was kidnapped and executed in 1961 (largely understood to be supported by Belgian and US)
  - Years of confusion followed, ultimately resulting in Mobutu taking power – Congo Crisis
- Mobutu years
  - Country named Zaire from 1971-1997
  - Dictator financially and politically propped up by the US and allies during cold war
  - Mobutu led the country into ruin, and was dropped by the US at the end of the cold war

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### Recent War

- **First Congo War (1996-1997)**
  - Led by Rwanda as a response to the genocide
- **Second Congo War (1998 – 2003)**
  - Kabila took power
  - Directly involved over 9 countries
  - "Africa's World War"
- **Kivu Conflict (2004-present)**
  - M23 (Rebel Group) rebellion
  - Funded by Rwanda and Uganda
- **Dongo conflict (2009–present)**
  - Northwest DRC



- **Underlying themes:**
  - Greed to plunder rare earth minerals, particularly those critical for modern technology – mobile phones, computers, aerospace, etc.
  - External (Western) interests concerned about nationalization of resources
  - Rwanda forcibly annexing eastern provinces of Congo and oppressing the population

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## Results of War

- Rape, murder, torture
- Children forced to kill
- Families forced to rape and kill their own
- Sexual slavery
- Houses are burned with people inside or destroyed
- Rape has been used against the population as a calculated strategy to destroy the fabric of Congolese society
- The largest peacekeeping force in UN history was deployed to The Congo but has been unable to restore peace, law and order

Over 5 million people have died since 1998

Many more are left with psychological and physical wounds...

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## Special Issue: Rape and Sexual Violence

- Sexual Violence
  - Women
  - Men
  - Children
- Human trafficking – sold as sexual slaves
- Women victims are doubly victimised
  - rejected by their family
- Spread of AIDS



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## Reality of Sexual Abuse

“Official UN figures also show that recorded cases of sexual violence in North Kivu soared from 4,689 cases in 2011 to 7,075 in 2012. Many more cases remain unreported.”

A ‘weapon of war’

-Rape has become a strategy of war in Eastern DRC. The implementation is systematic and the campaign is massive



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### Discriminated groups

- Banyamulange
  - Historically from Rwanda – Tutsi descendants
  - Settled in South Kivu
- Bashi
  - Descendants always from DRC
  - Live in South Kivu (Bukavu)
- Bahunde
  - Hutu descendants, but historically from Rwanda
  - Settled in North Kivu
  - Language barrier – speak language of Rwanda

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### Refugee Profile

Originating from Democratic Republic of the Congo [1]	
Refugees [2]	509,396
Asylum Seekers [3]	56,965
Returned Refugees [4]	71,924
Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) [5]	2,669,069
Returned IDPs [6]	304,596
Various [8]	0
<b>Total Population of Concern</b>	<b>3,611,950</b>

Refugees are usually fleeing to surrounding countries to seek refuge, but some have fled further afield.

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### Life in the camps

#### Difficult and extreme conditions

- Shelter is bare minimum
  - mud bricks/ plastic sheeting /dirt floor
  - Well water
  - Pit toilets
- Food rations dependent on UN
  - Food often out of date
  - Barely sufficient for survival
  - Maybe 1 or 2 cups of beans per month
  - No charcoal or oil to cook food



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### Life in the camps

#### Lawlessness in the camps

- Prostitution for survival is rife
- Constant Sexual harassment especially from male refugees and local officials
- Adolescent girls and young women /single mothers—especially orphan girls are most at risk physically and morally
- Corruption at many levels – refugees entirely dependent on officials for survival: the power gap is enormous and exploitation common



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### PRIORITY ISSUES

#### Mental health:

- Refugees usually arrive with high levels of stress and trauma, many have been raped and tortured.
- Post traumatic stress disorder has become the norm in most refugee communities

#### Language:

- Effective English language education is vital.
- Most Congolese from rural areas will not know English or French
- Even for those Congolese who are educated, lack of English major impediment to local assimilation, integration, work opportunities

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**Priority Issues**

Educational support:

- Children usually resilient and often integrate more quickly than parents
- Support schools to prepare for arrival of refugee children who have had traumatic experiences
- Secondary trauma

Personal articles:

- Refugees often leave their homes in a hurry without any mementos of their existence
- Family records, photographs, formal ID, qualification certificates
- Loss of continuity with their past

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**Support**

- Supporting cultural traditions and values can be helpful for refugees trying to integrate into the United States

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**Traditions and Culture**

- Birth
  - Little access to medical care, usually birth babies at home
  - Hospitals may feel threatening
  - New mother is given intensive support for 3 months
- Naming
  - 2 days after birth
  - Mubutu ordered Christian names abolished
  - Name children according to circumstances
- Child upbringing
  - Raised by the community
  - Corporal punishment
  - Eye contact for discipline
  - Non-verbal communication and gestures

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### Traditions and Culture

- Marriage
  - Consenting marriage
  - Arranged marriages are rare (but does exist)
  - Bride price (Dot, or Dowry)
- Patriarchal
  - Most practice monogamous relationship
  - Children belong to the father after dowry (if no dowry, they belong to woman)
- Respect for elders
  - Respect to elders or respected people
  - No direct eye contact to elders
  - Not initiate handshake
  - Kneel down or prostrate to show respect

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### Traditions and Culture

- Death rites
  - Elaborate ceremonies
  - Not allowed to undergo post-mortem or cremation
  - Burial of the body after being in home for 1 or 2 days
  - Community mourning for at least 1 week
  - Buried by relatives in cemetery
- Music
  - Rhumba
- Traditional Medicine
  - Herbal remedies for many afflictions
  - Can consult a traditional healer – “Feticheur”
- Witchcraft
  - Can influence many actions and relationships in community
  - Sometimes contradicts strong Christian religious beliefs

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### Complex Trauma

- Cumulative traumatic events can effect the lives of refugees
  - Consider how the experience of resettlement in the US can trigger some of these memories

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### Trauma-informed approaches

- Cross-disciplinary
  - You are not all counselors or psychologists, but may be “first responders”
- Improve effectiveness
  - Using best practices for working with trauma survivors can improve the effectiveness of your work by understanding the best way to communicate your objectives and listen to your colleagues or beneficiaries
- “Traumatized” vs having experienced traumatic events

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### Trauma-informed approaches

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA):
  - “Trauma-informed services are based on an understanding of the vulnerabilities or triggers of trauma survivors ... so that these services and programs can be more supportive and avoid re-traumatization”
  - Understanding of our own role as trauma-informed workers

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