

Congo Humanitarian Crisis the Worst

By TODD PITMAN, AP ONLINE

DAKAR, Senegal (AP) - War-ravaged Congo is suffering the world's deadliest humanitarian crisis, with 38,000 people dying each month mostly from easily treatable diseases, a study published Friday in Britain's leading medical journal said.

Nearly 4 million people died between 1998-2004 alone - the indirect result of years of ruinous fighting that has brought on a stunning collapse of public health services, the study in the Lancet concluded.

The majority of deaths were due to disease rather than violence, but war has cut off or reduced access to health services for millions in the impoverished nation the size of Europe.

Most deaths reported were due to "preventable and easily treatable diseases," the study said. Malaria, diarrhea, respiratory infections and malnutrition topped the list.

Major fighting ended in Congo in 2002 but the situation remains dire because of continued insecurity, poor access to health care and inadequate international aid. The problems are particularly acute in eastern Congo.

"Rich donor nations are miserably failing the people of (Congo), even though every few months the mortality equivalent of two southeast Asian tsunamis plows through its territory," the study said.

Backed by about 15,000 U.N. peacekeepers, Congo's government is struggling to re-establish authority across the country ahead of elections expected later this year, the first in decades. Militiamen still roam huge swaths of the east, formerly controlled by several different rebel groups whose leaders have been allotted top government posts.

The study was based on a survey of 19,500 households across the country of 60 million between April and July 2004. Health Ministry workers and staff of the aid group International Rescue Committee conducted the interviews.

The results showed Congo's monthly mortality rate was 40 percent higher than the average for sub-Saharan Africa - 2.1 deaths per 1,000 people, or the equivalent of 1,200 fatalities per day, compared with a continental average of 1.5 deaths per 1,000.

Mortality rates were highest in Congo's eastern provinces, which have been wracked by fighting and lawlessness for a decade. There, death rates were 93 percent higher than the sub-Saharan Africa average.

“The persistently high mortality in ... Congo is deeply disturbing and indicates that both national and international efforts to address the crisis remain grossly inadequate,” the report said.

The survey is the fourth of its kind conducted in Congo, Africa's third-largest nation. The International Rescue Committee conducted three earlier surveys, the last of which in 2004 said that six years of conflict had claimed 3.8 million lives, mostly due to disease and food shortages.

Congo's government dismissed the report.

“I consider that a big lie,” Minister of Information, Henri Mova Sakanyi said. “These figures are very exaggerated. All over the world, people die of disease, it's not just Congo,” Sakanyi told The Associated Press.

“It's known that (aid) agencies have often played with the figures ... to get financial support,” the minister added.

The Lancet study said the deaths counted were “excess” deaths that would not have occurred if the situation in Congo was normal.

Much of Africa has grappled with conflict or natural disaster - drought-induced food shortages in Niger last year, fighting in Sudan's Darfur region and in northern Uganda. But Congo “remains the world's deadliest humanitarian crisis,” the study said.

“Improvements in security and increased humanitarian assistance are urgently needed.”

Congo suffered back-to-back wars. The first was in 1996-1997 when Rwandan-backed rebels swept the country to overthrow dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. A second 1998-2002 war sucked in the armies of half a dozen African nations.

Fighting led to mass displacement and a collapse of public health services, rights abuses and an increase in rape. Some remote areas are still cut off from contact with the outside world.

But the situation in Congo was dire for decades: years of corruption left the country deeply impoverished and undeveloped despite its mineral wealth.

The report blamed the crisis partly on a drop in donor aid, saying the U.N. had only raised 42 percent of the funding it sought. It said the U.S. Agency for International Development's contributions had fallen 25 percent.

“In spite of the critical need to complement increased humanitarian assistance with scaled-up security and diplomatic measures, the response of the international community to date remains inadequate.”

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