

"We work in the areas where the need is greatest"

Goma, 14 November 2008

The recent upsurge in fighting in North Kivu in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) between government forces and the rebel general Laurent Nkunda has displaced over a quarter of a million people and has posed new challenges to international aid agencies working in the region. It is estimated that after around ten years of the conflict there are up to 1.4 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. The European Commission is amongst the largest humanitarian aid donors in the DRC providing €50 million (US\$62.5 m) in 2008.

Yvan Hildebrand from the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) has been based at the department's Goma office during the latest crisis.

Q: Is the humanitarian situation under control?

Yvan Hildebrand: The humanitarian aid response in North Kivu has scaled up immensely following the resumption of fighting in August. The United Nations estimates that around 250,000 people have been driven from their homes during that time, many of whom have made their way to Goma and the surrounding countryside. Donor agencies like the Commission and our implementing partners have made a swift adjustment on the ground to the increased numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs) providing shelter, tools and household items as well as food and water, medical care and a safe place to sit out the conflict. In Kibati camp, just outside Goma, it is estimated that there are now up to 45,000 IDPs - around ten times the number before the present conflict. There are many more IDPs living outside the camps with families, and those people also need help.

Q: How difficult is it running a humanitarian aid operation in a conflict area?

YH: The continuing clashes mean that the population is no longer stable: people are moving around. We need to build up an accurate picture of where they are and the assistance they need. During lulls in the fighting, aid agencies focus heavily on finding out this vital information. Access can also be problematic. Many of the IDPs are behind the frequently shifting front lines, so we need to find ways of reaching them without endangering humanitarian workers. The rebels have promised safe passage but there is always the danger of getting caught up in cross-fire. And there is also the very real threat of military forces on the move and those garrisoned near camps creating more humanitarian needs.

Q: Why does the Commission support humanitarian work behind the rebel front line?

YH: We work in the areas where the need is greatest and provide humanitarian assistance regardless of the ethnicity or political affiliations of the people who have been displaced. One of the many front lines is now on the other side of Kibati camp, just five kilometres from Goma town, so our partners are having to work behind rebel lines. This inevitably means building up an understanding with rebels to ensure safe access. Ultimately, the Commission's Humanitarian Aid department and its partners have to keep out of the politics and focus on providing impartial humanitarian support.

Q: Is more money needed for the humanitarian aid effort in North Kivu?

YH: The humanitarian crisis in DRC has been well-funded, receiving around €492 million (US\$615m) from the international community in 2008 alone. It is a lot of money, but the challenges across the DRC are huge after years of conflict. The logistical problems in reaching those in need are extremely challenging; indeed up to 10% of all aid is spent on logistics. For example the Commission has a dedicated air service called "ECHO Flight" that cost €6 million (US\$7.5m) in 2008 and which provides transport to partners in the field. Without this support, partners would not be able to work in many parts of eastern DRC. Despite the huge costs and the renewed fighting, there are enough funds right now to respond to current humanitarian needs in North Kivu. But we obviously have to try to look ahead, assess the situation and judge whether we need to scale up our activities further.