HOUSE OF COMMONS

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: The situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, HC 1828

Tuesday 21 April 2026

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Janet Daby; Monica Harding; Brian Mathew; David Mundell; David Taylor.

Questions 1 - 40

Witnesses

I: Vianney Dong, Country Director, Women for Women International; Shuna Keen, Director of Advocacy and Programmes, Action Against Hunger UK; Katy Nembe Katonda, Deputy Country Representative DRC, CAFOD.

II: Fred Bauma, Executive Director, Ebuteli; Hélène Helbig de Balzac, Co-founder and Senior Analyst, HIVE.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Vianney Dong, Shuna Keen and Katy Nembe Katonda.

Q1 **Chair:** I am starting this one-off session of the International Development Committee on the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which we will refer to as DRC. We have two panels. Could I ask the first panel to introduce themselves?

Katy Nembe Katonda: Good afternoon. My name is Katy Nembe. I am the deputy country representative for CAFOD, Catholic Agency for Overseas Development. I am based in Goma. It is a pleasure to be here.

Shuna Keen: Good afternoon. I am Shuna, director of advocacy and programmes at Action Against Hunger UK. We are a global humanitarian organisation working to end hunger. It is a pleasure to be here. Thanks so much for the Committee's continued efforts and engagement to keep DRC in focus.

Vianney Dong: Good afternoon, hon. Members, and thank you for creating this time for us. I am Vianney Dong, the country director of Women for Women International. I am currently taking this call from Kinshasa but I am based in Uvira. For decades, Women for Women has been supporting the implementation of programmes in the DRC, enabling social, economic and civic participation at each level. Today is an opportunity for us to leverage the voices of women at this level. Thank you very much for creating this time.

Q2 **Chair:** Katy, this might seem a simple question, but what is it like right now for people living in DRC?

Katy Nembe Katonda: Thank you very much for the question. I will speak particularly on the area that is significantly affected by the crisis: eastern DRC. It is an area that is affected significantly by protracted crisis. It has been long, and we feel there is a fatigue in talking about the situation in the eastern DRC. This is an opportunity for me to thank the Committee for allowing us time to resurface how people are living in this part of the country, and generally in DRC.

I cannot talk without mentioning the extreme humanitarian crisis situation in the eastern part of the DRC. It is in an area governed by the central Government, but also by a de facto authority. I am talking about part of South and North Kivu where sexual and gender-based violence, SGBV, continues to be high. Poverty is rampant. Actually, the level has gone even higher over the past two years because there is no access. There is no access, for instance, in Goma, Bukavu and other areas covered by the de facto authority. Access is quite limited. There is no access to airports, be it in South Kivu, Bukavu, or Goma. The humanitarian corridor is very limited; otherwise it would be easy to deploy support. It has become close to impossible to access those areas, particularly those areas in the interior. It is such a difficult situation.

Alongside that, some normal structures, such as bank services, governed by the central Government are not functional. People have to find middle ways to juggle around to continue with life in this context. It is very difficult. As you may have noted in the past, in areas such as North and South Kivu in particular that are covered by the de facto authority, camps have been dismantled without any preparation to get people to go back to their original community, putting pressure on their livelihoods. The protection element of these people—women and children—is very high in such an area.

Q3 **Janet Daby:** Vianney, could you tell me the impact of the conflict in particular on women and girls?

Vianney Dong: Absolutely. From what Katy has explained, as you can imagine insecurity is persistent. Civilians, most particularly women and girls, continue to show the burden in an environment where the women are exposed to sexual violence. They are a very vulnerable target for all parties involved in the conflict, yet these women are so resilient. It is something I have seen. Despite the impact of the conflict on them, they are not naming sexual violence or the household.

Katy referred to the conflict having an impact on displacement. All these women have lost their households and the small savings they were making just to meet their basics at home. They have lost everything. Sometimes we can get lost in the figures. We can speak of more than 5.3 million being displaced during this crisis. These are figures. But when you meet a woman and start speaking to her, you then understand what it means to be a displaced woman in an environment where all the facilities are not accessible. Sometimes it is a pregnant woman. She does not understand where she will deliver or even how she can carry all the children she has. That is the reality we are facing. At the same time, when you push on and continue the conversation, you understand that this woman has hope. She trusts that one day things will definitely end. That gives us the ability or boldness to continue working with these women.

Katy Nembe Katonda: Picking up on what Vianney mentioned, I really want to come back to the element of hope. What wakes me up in my house to go every day to my office is the hope and resilience that comes from these affected women. You see a lot of hope and good will that goes beyond what is perceived in the situation—seeing women rise and try as much as possible to initiate local coping mechanisms to bring food to the table and speak to women in other groups. That is why localised initiatives that target women, particularly in the grassroots and communities, are very significant and go beyond all those texts and agreements to see how they affect the lives of these women. That is what we should be talking about.

I just want to give an example of what we are working on: the initiatives of women at community level from different churches in the community, particularly in cross-border towns. I am talking about Goma and Gisenyi,

Bukavu and Cyangugu; these are the contexts that are characterised by the sensitivity of the conflict. Going beyond this, these women also have cross-border activity that affects the economic life of the border town. These women make an intentional effort to come together and discuss how they can go beyond the stereotypes and agreements that in some contexts have not materialised. These women in the community are the ones we are talking about. They are making a lot of effort to rebuild their hope and see how they can re-establish their life and live with dignity. However difficult the context is, those small efforts are what need to be accompanied, localised on how best these women can elevate their lives.

Q4 **Janet Daby:** You have answered my second point, Katy, which is about how women can be involved in peace building at a local and national level. You have gone into that, which is excellent. Vianney, would you like to respond to that as well in terms of peacekeeping, both at a local and national level and women's influence in that area?

Vianney Dong: Absolutely. The bottom line for us to understand is what peace really means for these women. As all have probably heard, there has been a lot of disagreement in the DRC, not mentioning the US, Doha or the EU. Even as we speak, there are still a lot of talks, moving from Doha to Switzerland. What does that really mean for these women? When you go and talk to these women in terms of peace, they will tell you that they want to sleep without hearing bullets, as simple as that is. Peace for these women means they want their children to sleep without hearing gunfire. That is peace. "I want to wake up, cook, and eat with my children." This is peace. These are simple words, yet they really mean a lot. It is safety and the ability to care for their family. That is what they are speaking about.

During the Women, Peace, and Security's 25th anniversary, Women for Women conducted a survey. We then managed to interview more than 800 women in eastern DRC. It was very important to listen to these women, and 99% of women we surveyed believed their situation will improve. This was very straightforward, and I mentioned it before.

Women can bring peace to their community. As Katy said, we have those community dialogues and cultural aspects to the role women play in the family. When a woman has money and you ask her how she is spending that money, she will start by saying, "I will set a path for paying school fees for my kid. I will do this and that for the family." The first thing the woman will think is about the household, the children and the family, not necessarily herself. If we bring a woman to the table to seek peace, she can really bring a lot to this area. We can provide a safe space so they can talk, engage, thrive, hope, and even care for themselves.

It is possible for peace processes to make sure that women are a part of them. They bring a lot to the table. What we have witnessed so far is that most of the time they are excluded. People think they can bring peace but those who are heavily impacted are not at the table—yet they have a voice. They can bring a lot based on their experience, who they are, and

how they already take care at a household level. There is still a space for them to speak up.

Q5 **David Taylor:** I want to ask about the humanitarian situation in the eastern part of the country. Shuna, I would love to hear your thoughts.

Shuna Keen: The important thing to remember is that this crisis and the armed conflict in eastern DRC, which has affected the nation as a whole, has been going on for 30 years. While there are certainly stories and evidence of resilience, it is important to remember that what we are seeing is extreme hardship. People have to endure increasingly difficult conditions with very limited means, which reflects the lack of choice in their situation. It is happening against the backdrop of funding for humanitarian aid reducing globally, which has impacted the DRC as well.

The situation continues to deteriorate, and people's basic needs are not being met. To share with you what that looks like in numbers, an estimated 9 million people are projected to be displaced in the DRC by the end of 2026. That makes it one of the largest displacement crises in the world, and comes at a huge human cost to individuals, as the other panellists have already described. It means that, for example, we are looking at nearly 15 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.

Q6 **David Taylor:** Sorry, 15 or 50?

Shuna Keen: It is 15 million. I can send these figures through afterwards. We are also seeing that hyper-prioritisation is happening now because, within the overall number of people targeted in the Humanitarian Response Plan, there is just not the funding for them. Of the 15 million, 7.3 million were targeted in that plan. From that, 4.7 million were hyper-prioritised, which means decisions had to be made at local level about who does and does not get assistance. That means people are already not getting the help they need for their basic needs to be met. That really reflects a funding gap of about half a million just for the hyper-prioritised requirements, which came in at just under 1 billion. That is an example in figures setting out the scene as to how the funding situation is impacting the overall system's ability to respond.

As already mentioned, as this crisis goes on there is a risk of normalisation or acceptance of the situation and the suffering people are experiencing against a global picture of competing crises in Sudan and the Middle East. The situation in DRC, being one of the older conflicts and humanitarian crises, means we are now seeing donor fatigue, as one of the other panellists has already mentioned. It is really important to keep the focus on the situation and the need for continued engagement, which includes political, diplomatic and financial. The UK has a really important role to play in that still.

In terms of diplomatic and political action, but also aid, that level of engagement is really important to prevent further escalation and to protect civilians and avoid further shrinking of humanitarian space. It is

important to remember as well that the crisis is not just affecting people in eastern DRC. With the shrinking amount of aid available, there is a risk that aid focuses on North and South Kivu. We are already seeing that. However, other areas where there are high levels of need in the east, such as Ituri Province, are being under-served. In other provinces towards the west, we are just not able to meet needs because the funding is not available from donors. We are seeing that there is quite a lot of neglect.

Action Against Hunger focuses on nutrition and hunger. What we are seeing is that the nutrition crisis is a nationwide crisis. It is a structural crisis fuelled by poverty, forced displacement, conflict, and the erosion of public services and infrastructure, as well as recurring shocks like epidemics. Very high numbers of people are expected to face acute food insecurity. The IPC, which is the global body for classification of hunger and famine, projected 26 million. Those are the kinds of numbers we are seeing projected this year. It means that 40% of the population, or around 40 million people, are facing chronic food insecurity, which affects children in particular. Over 4 million children under five are suffering from acute malnutrition, and 1.5 million pregnant and breastfeeding women are facing acute malnutrition. Although our focus is nutrition and hunger, we also work on health. It is important to remember that mental health remains one of the most overlooked areas and is an underfunded humanitarian need in the DRC.

Q7 **David Taylor:** Thanks for bringing up the funding cuts issue; another colleague of mine will ask about that. I want to check something specific: are there any access or safety issues in terms of your colleagues getting the aid to where it needs to be? I did not hear that in your answer. If it is not a problem, it is okay. We just want to know.

Shuna Keen: Yes, I can talk about that; thanks for asking. That is one of the main challenges that hampers humanitarian response, as well as the funding gap. For example, humanitarian access is severely constrained by ongoing insecurity and armed conflict in North Kivu, which hinders delivery. We are seeing similar in Ituri Province where there has been a significant displacement of more than 100,000 people in the last year and the forced suspension of humanitarian activities. That is a big challenge for us, as is the safety and security of humanitarian response personnel.

This is one of the key areas that Action Against Hunger focuses on globally because it affects our operations and our ability to respond to humanitarian needs in a number of contexts, not just in the Democratic Republic of Congo. There are a number of things that the UK and other Governments can do. It is important to remember that a UN resolution was passed by the Security Council in 2024. This is Resolution 2730, which focuses on the safety and security of humanitarian personnel. It means, for example, that under international humanitarian law parties to the conflict must take all possible measures to protect humanitarian

personnel and assets. We are seeing that being compromised in many situations globally.

Q8 **Chair:** Shuna, can I pause you there? You said there were more things the UK could be doing. Specifically, what more could the UK be doing?

Shuna Keen: Yes, especially in humanitarian diplomacy, which is really important—and in funding as well, because it enables access to hard-to-reach areas where humanitarian actors are not currently able to get to. Humanitarian diplomacy, co-ordination, and engagement with all parties to the conflict to enable access is really important.

The details of Resolution 2730 are really the guidelines for the UK Government and other Governments. For example, condemning violence and calling out international humanitarian law violations. Calling for accountability for violations, including investigations, is really important. As we have seen in the DRC and many other contexts of violent armed conflict, where violations happen without accountability there is ongoing impunity that then drives further a culture of impunity and escalation of violence. The local staff and organisations are really important as well, which is in the resolution, and face increased risks compared with international organisations, NGOs and Governments. Their level of exposure is higher, so involving them in the dialogue around what is needed for their safety and security is really important.

Chair: That is a point well made.

Q9 **David Mundell:** Can we come back to what you were saying about the reduction of resources and particularly focus on the reduction of UN resources and its role in co-ordinating the humanitarian response? What has been the impact of that?

Shuna Keen: I do not have figures for the UN specifically, but I could talk more generally about aid cuts and UK aid cuts specifically. What it is important to remember, in terms of co-ordination, is having the right structures at the right level that are decentralised enough to have province level and below localised co-ordination mechanisms that involve local actors and take into account the contextual and operational realities, which tend to be highly localised. Going back to the last point, it would increase the safety of humanitarian personnel because there would be better co-ordination and negotiation with the parties to the conflict for access and safety. We are seeing that it would be an improvement on some current practices of co-ordination, which are more at national level.

Q10 **David Mundell:** What about in relation to the pooling of efforts? Could the various organisations involved work better together?

Shuna Keen: What we see working well are the area-based co-ordination platforms. Taking an area-based approach to co-ordination that is again localised at sub-national, provincial and other levels is much more effective. That would be the case in any context. If you consider that the country is the size of western Europe, having area-based co-

ordination platforms at a more localised level enables much better co-ordination. We really promote that as a solution. Replacing the cluster system as the main co-ordination mechanism is what we would like to see happen.

Vianney Dong: Thank you very much for this question and, Shuna, thank you for your point. As I mentioned earlier, we did a consultation with women and one of the questions we asked was, "How can relief and recovery efforts be improved to better support women in conflict-affected communities?" Among the responses provided, they mentioned increasing funding and resources, but they also spoke about enhancing co-ordination among organisations. To emphasise, the women we serve and those at the local level would also love to see that co-ordination improve or enhanced among organisations.

In terms of the impact of the cutting of funding, there are quite a lot of examples. I remember that we had a very good project last time. The project was providing ABC knowledge in terms of how you handle a case of SGBV because, as a humanitarian person, you cannot be trained in something that requires a lot of training. The project aimed to give ABC knowledge to everyone working in the humanitarian sector, so they could at least behave correctly faced with such a case. It was a very good project but it was interrupted. We had a 23-year-old girl who was raped and then referred later on. She could get advice and even go to the hospital. Now that cannot happen. How many women and girls are experiencing the same as we speak? This is the reality we are facing.

Katy Nembe Katonda: Just going back to the role of the UK Government in such a situation, my colleagues have already mentioned the element of funding but I want to be a bit more specific. Beyond the element of funding, Shuna talked about localised support and the need to support local actors as well, including national organisations, and mentioned the risks that are affecting them. It is important for me to respond and make sure that, when we are talking about funding, it goes to the national women-led organisations that are at the forefront. They are the first victim. Their views are very significant and it is important to ensure that their voice is brought to the decision-making table.

Q11 **Brian Mathew:** Shuna, you mentioned that there were some problems with the cluster. Could you outline what the problems with that are?

Shuna Keen: I do not think I will be able to go into very much detail about the problems of the current system, but it might be one I could follow-up on. It is more a question of advocating for the area-based co-ordination platforms, because they are much more localised and reflective of local context and operational realities, and provide some co-ordination mechanisms that are much nearer to the point of impact. We may be able to follow-up with more information.

Brian Mathew: Thank you; that would be useful.

Q12 **David Mundell:** I have one further question. We are told that within the areas of conflict, as part of the consequence of the conflict, even if local food is available people are not able to access it because food coming in from Rwanda is given preference over local foodstuffs. Is that something that is contributing to the hunger situation?

Shuna Keen: The conflict is the main driver of hunger in the DRC, and that is the case in many contexts. Often conflict disrupts food systems and markets and drives up food prices, so people affected by a conflict who have had to flee their homes cannot afford to feed themselves. Remember that the people in eastern DRC are primarily agricultural workers, so when they are displaced from their homes and fields it is difficult for them to grow their own food or work for others on their fields.

I could share more details but one particular woman, a mother of four called Marie, was displaced. She ended up in a displacement camp and was separated from her husband, so she was left alone with five children and was pregnant. One of the solutions she found was to work in other people's fields when she could with her son, leaving the other children behind. By doing that, she might earn up to 4,000 Congolese francs. I am not sure what the rate is to the dollar but it would not be as much as $3 or $4. We should check that. Some of that work would not even be available to her. The impact is that, with what she can earn from her labour, it is really sweet potatoes or other staples. For five months, Marie and her family did not have a single meal containing animal protein: no eggs, dairy, meat or fish. That is dangerous for small children and for Marie who was pregnant at the time. That is just to give an individual story of the conflict and coping mechanisms people have to find—women in particular—that impact their ability to find nutritious food.

Q13 **Monica Harding:** Are you aware of any programmes that are being cut by the UK?

Vianney Dong: I am not aware of any programmes so far especially from the UK, but I wanted to add something on the access issue. When we speak of access, safety and resources, they really speak to each other. You will see that insecurity limits access. In context, if we are in an insecure situation then the access is limited and reduced resources restrict presence. Together they deepen gaps in assistance for the population, especially women and girls. I wanted to bring that into this call.

Shuna Keen: We are seeing the impact of aid cuts in the DRC, and it is impacting not only food security but also humanitarian health programming and response. For example, in one particular province in Ituri the health centres where Action Against Hunger held health programmes were suspended due to aid cuts. That care then becomes fee-based, so people are having to make difficult choices about what they can afford in terms of being able to access health and feed themselves and their families. In that province we saw the number of health

consultations drop by half, not because there was no need but because people could not afford to pay the fees to access healthcare.

Just going back to the testimony of Marie, she faced a difficult choice as to how to give birth to her child. Vianney mentioned that this is an increasing challenge that many women are facing in a context of scarcity. Marie was told that she could not deliver naturally. She would need a caesarean section and that procedure would cost $70 in her village, which is way beyond her ability to pay when she was already struggling to feed her family. With less than a month before her due date, she was faced with a difficult decision. She had to then leave her children for days while she walked to a place where she could get a caesarean and access those services for free. It was a dangerous journey, not just for her and her health being heavily pregnant but also because there was a chance that she would come across armed men en route. I wanted to share that as an illustration of the kinds of difficult choices people face when funding for humanitarian programmes for health and nutrition are cut.

Q14 **Monica Harding:** How far did she have to travel?

Shuna Keen: She had to walk for days to get to a place where she could access healthcare and have the caesarean for free because she could not afford the $70 to do that in her local health centre.

Chair: Thank you all very much. We are sitting here quite chilled by your testimony, but we really appreciate it. Thank you. If there is stuff you want to follow up with us on in writing, we would really appreciate that.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Fred Bauma and Hélène Helbig de Balzac.

Q15 **Chair:** Could you introduce yourselves and your organisations, please?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: My name is Hélène Helbig de Balzac. I am from Belgium and am based in Brussels. I am the co-founder of the Belgium NGO HIVE. We support responsible trade of minerals from high-risk countries, with a big focus on the Great Lakes region. I have around 15 years' experience investigating how illicit mineral flows move from conflict zones into global markets and how they finance armed groups and human rights violations. We also work on documenting human rights abuses to support accountability mechanisms.

Fred Bauma: My name is Fred Bauma. I am the director of Ebuteli, a research think-tank based in Kinshasa. We work mainly on understanding violence in eastern DRC. We run a tool called the Kivu Security Tracker, which identifies every single incident of conflict and violence in North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri; we also work on understanding Congolese politics and governance issues. I am also a human rights activist originally from Goma and now living in Kinshasa.

Chair: Thank you both ever so much for joining us and for the work that

you do. My apologies that we are running a little late; I appreciate you bearing with us on that.

Q16 **Brian Mathew:** Fred, how would you describe the domestic political situation in DRC at the moment?

Fred Bauma: The domestic situation in DRC can be described by two different trends. On one side, there is conflict ongoing in eastern DRC. The most publicised one, of course, is the M23 conflict backed by Rwanda. It is an aggression—we should call it as it is—that has caused displacement of millions of people and increased economic instability in eastern DRC. Another conflict in the same region, which people usually do not talk about but which is equally important, is the ADF crisis caused by the Islamic group in North Kivu and Ituri. This is a very important thing to mention as we talk about this conflict because it caused a lot of displacement and a lot of killings and kidnapping in the region. In the last months, we have documented more than 500 kidnappings by that group.

On the conflict side, which is the first trend I mentioned, in DRC it has caused millions of people to be displaced and has affected the regional economy a lot. Because of the occupation of M23 in North Kivu and South Kivu, many NGOs, businesses and banks were forced to close their offices, putting hundreds of thousands of hard-working Congolese people out of work. It also affected mobility and circulation around different cities in North Kivu, South Kivu and other provinces, making trade and business and the normal movement of the population very difficult. There is a feeling that people are being punished for a conflict that they did not ask for or start, and that they have endured for more than 30 years. That is one aspect of what is happening on the domestic side.

On the other hand, in Kinshasa we see that the political and domestic situation is dominated by the renewed discussion at a national level around constitutional reform, mostly focused on extending the current administration rule beyond constitutional limits. These two trends, though not separate, reflect a growing disconnect between what seems to be the people's priority, especially those in eastern DRC but also the rest of the country, which is peace, security and economic relief, and what seems to be the Congolese leadership priority, which is mostly focused on political ambitions.

Q17 **Brian Mathew:** Are you saying that the conflict in the east affects the politics in the rest of the country, or is it separate? Is it seen as the east is the east?

Fred Bauma: The conflict in eastern DRC very much affects politics in the rest of the country in different ways. First, because of Rwandan involvement, it revives a lot of trauma in the entire country; it gives a political discourse that can mobilise people, especially against Rwanda and a Rwandan-backed rebellion. But also somehow it is used as an opportunity for the Government to push for stronger and contested policies, for repression of opponents, accusing them of supporting M23,

with or without evidence, and restricting the domestic area. Recently, we also see the conflict being used to explain why national priority should go to defence and security instead of other sectors of life, which is understandable given the circumstances, but also it has put aside a lot of other needs for millions of people who suffer for access to basic needs, food and other issues. So it affects people in the east, but it also serves a political discourse and political actions in Kinshasa, and so conflict somehow becomes politics.

Q18 **Brian Mathew:** How could the UK best support civil society in the DRC? Perhaps, Hélène, we will start with you and then let us hear from you, Fred.

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: Civil society is not really my area of focus, but maybe it is Fred's as he leads a local NGO.

Brian Mathew: All right, sorry. Then let us just hear from Fred on that one.

Fred Bauma: There are many ways the UK can support civil society actors in DRC and in eastern DRC in particular. The UK has played a leading role in funding development, having stood for and supported human rights organisations in the past; those are things that the UK can continue to do. DRC is known for its vibrant civil society. Even in areas like Goma, you have groups that stand for human rights as part of the movement called Lucha that was important in mobilising people. Groups such as Goma Actif have provided people with humanitarian assistance before everybody came. There is a local collective of humanitarian organisations such as CAFOD, which does impressive work in eastern DRC.

The UK can support such groups so that they can continue to work in their conditions by standing alongside them, carrying their message, and not abandoning the discourse on human rights, which we currently see people put aside for more pragmatic business discourse. It can help by providing funding to those organisations. There is a tendency to cut funds for humanitarian assistance and focus on business. We see this also in DRC. If we want to continue to have a vibrant civil society, we need to continue to support that civil society. The UK can assist by working alongside other countries such as the US and structures such as the European Union in making sure the voice of civil society is taken into consideration in different peace processes, and discussions on reconstruction and development, and not let those processes become elite-centred.

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: If I can just add on this point, it is key that public donors promote synergy between the fundings to avoid isolated action. For example, you can have some funding focused on social cohesion and other funding on trade access, and try to synergize those fundings so they create a bigger impact. If everyone works in a silo, we see less impact. Sometimes it is hard, because people working on social

cohesion and peace building do not want to look at anything on trade; but trade is key, so it requires a change of mentality of typical development action.

Q19 **David Mundell:** Fred, what is your assessment of the latest progress in US peace talks?

Fred Bauma: That is a very good question. First, I have to say that US involvement was important, at least in limiting the expansion of the rebellion in Rutshuru. That being said, there is a clear disconnect between the peace processes in the negotiation room, on paper, and the reality on the ground. There are a few examples of this. On paper, several agreements have been signed since at least last year, including the regional integration framework between the US, Congo and Rwanda, the peace agreement between Rwanda and DRC, the framework agreement between M23 and DRC, and protocols that are supposed to lead to withdrawal of Rwandan forces and the end of M23. But what we see on the ground is M23 consolidating its position, replacing mayors, personnel and chiefs with its administrative leaders with the potential to exacerbate local conflict.

Another example of this disconnect is the continuous talk of a ceasefire and joint verification mechanism in different discussions, which has gone on for many months now, while at the same time, at least on the ground, we see an increased number of clashes between M23 and Congo's Government, or their proxies. We see the growing use of drones endangering many populations, including densely populated areas in Goma and the whole plateau of Upemba. In February alone, my organisation documented more than 207 incidents, including 94 clashes, half of them between M23 and the Congolese Government.

There is a sense of progress at the negotiation table but an alternative reality on the ground with more suffering and violence. It is very important that the UK and other partners make sure that progress at the negotiation table is followed by concrete actions on the ground. There is also a need for the people who negotiate to have the power and ability to do so in the name of their delegation. Pressure must be put on different parties so that the negotiation table is not just another space for managing time while waiting for further escalation.

Q20 **David Mundell:** What is required to create a lasting peace?

Fred Bauma: That is a 30-year-old question.

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: In the DRC, it is a big question. From my perspective, we need to better incorporate the economic dimension of the conflict into peace efforts. Recent peace processes regarding M23, such as those in Nairobi and Luanda, or even the Doha peace initiative, prioritised ceasefires and political de-escalation. The economic dimension is acknowledged by actors, but they often fall short due to political sensitivities, weak enforcement and insufficient regional co-ordination. I

strongly believe there is a need for an integrated approach to directly address the illicit economic network alongside political and security dynamics; it is definitely something that the UK Government could advocate for.

The financial flow associated with illicit trade of minerals not only sustains and finances conflict but combines with a lack of sustainable and inclusive economic opportunity, further fuelling conflict. The US peace deal looked at the economic dimension, but it was more focused on security against US access to critical minerals concession; the illicit flow of minerals that fuel the conflict is never really tackled. We need to integrate this economic dimension into the peace effort. That is key, because the economic dimension has been there throughout the 30 years of conflict, and it was never tackled as the root cause of the problem.

Q21 **Chair:** Hélène, who extracts the minerals and where do they go?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: It depends on the type of mineral. In the eastern DRC, there is what we call "small-scale" mining—basically, rudimentary extraction done by miners manually. Then it is traded. The majority of gold and coltan in the territory occupied by M23 transits to Rwanda and Uganda. Then it goes to an international trading hub, typically the Emirates and Hong Kong, where it is blended into the legitimate global supply chain. It is important to mention that this supply chain feeds the consumer electronic and EV industry and the defence systems on which the UK and allies depend. These minerals are critical for the EU and the UK to support energy transition but also the defence industry; it is key to remember that.

Q22 **Chair:** You said gold; I did not hear what the other critical mineral was.

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: It is coltan, which is tantalum ore and is key for the defence industry. It is considered by the UK as a critical mineral. It is used hugely by the defence industry. In terms of scale, M23 currently occupies a mine that produces 15% of the global supply of the tantalum. Everyone wants to secure these minerals for their defence industry.

When we discuss critical minerals, assuming that illicit trade of minerals is a key driver of conflict, it is very important for the UK or any Government who want to tackle this issue to have cross-ministerial and cross-departmental co-ordination and to potentially leverage public-private partnership. This issue spans trade policy, national security, energy transition, foreign policy and international development. We need to align the interest between different Ministries. I see this a lot at EU level, but I imagine things are similar in the UK between the FCDO, the Ministry of Defence, the Department for Business and Trade and the Department for Energy.

We just did the work of mapping the supply chain; when you do this, you are able to identify each actor at each level, such as commodity traders,

smelting and refinery companies, financial institutions, intermediaries and enablers. If you identify those people, you see the pinch points and where you can take action and have impact. Then you can promote alignment work between different Departments. I do not believe that isolated action from international development can have an impact, because it is a global issue.

Given its position, the UK can play a key role. London is a major global centre for commodity trading and gold markets, which is key. UK financial institutions ensure traders play a massive role in setting the norms for responsible sourcing, notably through the London Bullion Market Association and the London Metal Exchange. In terms of market power, the UK can leverage this type of trade association, especially because indirectly active members of those associations can use their influence to play a role in the specific supply chain originating from the Great Lakes region. It is quite interesting that we can tackle this type of issue with a holistic approach.

Q23 **Monica Harding:** Hélène, that is really helpful, thank you. Specifically in terms of gold, you say that the UK can leverage its influence. What does that look like in practice?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: The UK is the most important global market for gold. It has trade organisations such as the London Bullion Market Association, whose members are powerful in the gold trade. The public can work with the private sector to leverage influence. The second point—which I recently discussed and is quite interesting—is the fact that the UK has leverage over framework. Typically, the Financial Action Task Force, FATF, has a specific requirement for money laundering and terrorist financing, as I said, to gold. The majority of gold comes from conflict places and ends up in Dubai. But in this framework, we do not have any association with conflict financing. If the UK can leverage its influence to push the Financial Action Task Force to incorporate the association between gold and conflict minerals, the Emirates would align with that requirement, because it is not great for them to be on the grey list of the Financial Action Task Force. It would be interesting see the UK leverage over framework, where it has a lot of influence.

Q24 **Monica Harding:** Can I just clarify that? Are you saying that the gold goes via Dubai?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: The majority of gold extracted in conflict places around the world ends up in Dubai.

Q25 **Monica Harding:** And then it goes out of Dubai into Hong Kong and Switzerland and into—

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: Exactly. It is refined first in Dubai; then it is traded in Dubai; then, after the supply chain, it will end up in our industry. But the first stop from the Great Lakes in the DRC is a neighbouring country—so Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi—and then it is exported to Dubai. I know the UK is looking at that closely, because it

just created a private partnership on illicit flows associated with gold. There is definitely an interest in tackling that issue, given that the UK has the most important gold market.

Q26 **Janet Daby:** Thank you, Hélène; that is all helpful and extremely interesting but also quite troubling to hear. I have a couple of questions. In terms of the gold mines themselves—it may be difficult to explain this—how many mineral mines are there in the area? Does the DRC benefit at all from any of the minerals?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: Small-scale mining is different from that done on a large scale. Large-scale mining is one big mine; but on the territory occupied, for instance, by M23, we are talking about small-scale operations. There are a bunch of them—I do not know the exact number—but I can write to you about that. A Belgian organisation is mapping mine sites. In terms of people, it involves millions, many in associated extraction activities.

Q27 **Janet Daby:** Hélène, does the DRC benefit at all from the minerals?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: No.

Q28 **Janet Daby:** Not at all?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: Not a lot, because the DRC is characterised by a lack of governance in general. It has tax-related challenges to the trade and extraction of minerals, and for now, in M23 territory, the DRC Government do not get any benefit. M23 occupies the big tantalum mine; it is estimated they get around $800,000 a month through taxation of the extraction and trade. That gives you an idea of how much money can be generated when you control part of the supply chain.

Q29 **Janet Daby:** You speak about the UK being an influencer in terms of holding to account this irresponsible sourcing and what causes conflict. Do you see any other countries that are influencers as well as the UK?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: The US.

Q30 **Janet Daby:** Any others?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: The EU tries to do that with its Conflict Minerals Regulation. That was not translated into UK policy, and you use more the trade organisations such as the London Bullion Market Association to promote responsible sourcing. The EU was on the front line in supporting the responsible sourcing of minerals; it also has a polemical MOU with Rwanda to get access to critical minerals. Keep in mind, DRC produces a lot of key critical minerals; everyone in western society wants to secure that supply. At an EU or UK level, we may want to do that with no arms; the US has a different strategy. As I mentioned, the US deal is more like peace or security against access to critical minerals concession. You should work in partnership with EU countries to organise joint harmonised action.

Q31 **Monica Harding:** I want to ask one more question on gold. Most people in the UK are not aware that the gold around their neck comes from conflict zones. How difficult would a campaign such as blood diamonds be for conflict gold? Obviously, you cannot easily trace the country of origin, so how difficult would that be for a public campaign?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: People need to understand how the gold supply chain works and its different features, because it is not just a commodity; it is also a financial instrument to move different assets. A key aspect of why the UK is interested in gold is the criminality and the association with organised crime. It is important that people understand the different facets and dimensions of gold.

Q32 **Brian Mathew:** You mentioned coltan earlier. Does coltan follow similar routes? Where is coltan traded?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: Coltan is exported through ports in Dar es Salaam. After it exits Rwanda, 80% is shipped to China and processed there. We only identified one smelting company in Kazakhstan. There are trades between export and smelting companies, but obviously it does not go where the traders are based; trading companies are typically based in attractive jurisdictions like Hong Kong and the Emirates, and it is traded mainly to Chinese smelting companies. The current strategy of the US is to be less dependent on Chinese smelting.

Q33 **Brian Mathew:** It is a much heavier material, so gets taken out by truck or train. But is gold smuggled by aircraft? Do small aeroplanes fly and pick it up?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: Yes. Imagine—a batch of iPhones can do 1 kg of gold easily. You can hide it easily and there are not a lot of checks on entry to Dubai. The majority of gold is smuggled from the DRC border—where there is obviously no control—arrives in Rwanda or Uganda, and is then exported, typically legally, to the Dubai market, sometimes to a US-sanctioned entity.

In terms of change in trends, typically beforehand export was only to Dubai; recently we see shipments to Hong Kong. It seems that China and Hong Kong want to become key trading hubs for gold.

Q34 **Monica Harding:** Turning to armed actors, how can we hold them to account? What are the challenges there?

Fred Bauma: There are many ways to hold armed actors to account. First, it is important to call them out. Every time people acknowledge M23 and other groups as a negative force and name them as such, it helps people to understand their true nature. There is also the question of calling out human rights abuses in the areas they control. There are a lot of available resources from civil society and international organisations such as Human Rights Watch and others on this group. There has been a campaign from Congolese civil society on justice, led by many organisations and by people such as the Nobel prize winner, Dr Mukwege.

For many years, we have called for the release of the mapping report annexes and the creation of international or mixed jurisdiction to try human rights violations in DRC. A powerful way of supporting accountability and justice is to allow those mechanisms to happen; this will guarantee non-repetition and set an example for others who benefit from impunity in terms of human rights violations.

I have to say, the types of violation committed by armed groups such as M23 are the same as those perpetrated by groups supported by the Congolese Government, sometimes in areas under their control. So it is very important for the UK to focus not only on violations that happen in area controlled by armed groups, but human rights in general, including in Government areas, and hold both actors to account; that will be important.

Lastly, all the tools held by the UK in the past, including sanctions, may be very effective if they are used in all efforts, i.e. in co-ordination with other actors including France, Belgium, the European Union and the US. In the case of DRC at least, there is still room to mobilise such actors for a co-ordinated accountability effort.

Q35 **Monica Harding:** So are you saying that the sanctions have been useful or not? Or could they be better?

Fred Bauma: Some sanctions have been useful, at least in terms of the pressure they put on those who are sanctioned. They are very useful as long as they are well calibrated and complement other political processes; if it is only sanctions without supporting political or judicial processes, I fear they may not be very useful. I should say this: we need to ensure the actions we take do not end up punishing civilian populations who, again, did not call for them. That is something to keep in mind.

Chair: Hélène, did you want to come in on this?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: Yes, because I am interested in sanctions in general. The UK sanctions regime associated with the DRC is focused on individuals and entities involved in human rights abuse and conflict financing. The consequences of sanctions include travel bans and asset freezes of these individuals. But of course, the UK sanctions regime faces limitation, because much of the global mineral trade is done in US dollars, and many target actors have limited exposure to UK-based assets and the financial system. I strongly believe that sanctions should focus more on enablers, looking at supply chain actors, where potentially you can have more impact, because it will freeze assets and ban travel. Of course, that will have more impact than a militia guy from the DRC. But on the other hand, keep in mind that enablers deal in US dollars more than pounds, and do not necessarily have assets in the US.

Typically, the UK aligns with US and EU listing, which is interesting because that reinforces a co-ordinated international response.

Enforcement and monitoring of the sanction is a challenge that we see a lot, because typically law enforcement does not have access to information-sharing mechanisms between Government and relevant partners. In recent research, we see that sanction entities and individuals associated with the Great Lakes region implemented a large set of mechanisms to evade sanction. This is definitely challenging for law enforcement to track. So sanctions are great, but keep in mind that we need to reinforce the enforcement and monitoring of those sanctions.

Q36 **David Mundell:** Fred, were you aware that the UK Development Minister recently announced a package of support for the DRC, including significant initiatives to mobilise investment? Will the approach by the UK Government tackle the challenges faced by the DRC?

Fred Bauma: I am aware of the announcement and of course welcome any thought of investment of the UK in DRC. In terms of whether it is the right way to go, I would align with what Hélène said previously, that any development or humanitarian aid should be done in co-ordination with other policies of the UK Government. That being said, you cannot compartmentalise economic investment or business on one side and humanitarian conflict and politics on the other, because the shortcomings of political economic governance will eventually affect investment. It is very important for the UK not only to increase investment in DRC—there is an opportunity to do that—but to make sure that in doing so it pushes for clear governance reform and conflict resolution. Eventually the political actors who are decision makers are influenced by those other factors, and the effectiveness of that investment will eventually be affected by that.

A concrete example I can give to illustrate that is, in recent years, the UK has invested a lot in cross-border trade in eastern DRC, between Rwanda and Congo and within DRC, and in other critical infrastructure. Whenever conflict erupts, it is as if those investments were in vain. To summarise, I welcome those announcements, but you should avoid the trap of being entirely business-focused and see other aspects that will eventually affect the business environment.

Q37 **David Mundell:** I saw you nodding, Hélène. Are you in agreement with what Fred says?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: Yes, I am. The cut in the development budget is a big issue, as was discussed on the previous panel. I wondered how we could leverage private-public partnership. How do you align interests in the private sector and structure partnerships? Basically, you can work with private sector initiatives to align with judicious requirements, supply chain integrity, and with the interests of international development and security. That will allow the UK to leverage funds from the private sector in order to reach that same objective.

We see so much investment in the defence industry. The UK's semiconductor industry is key for defence products. Those guys may not

know a lot about supply chain integrity. How can you mix these incentives together to secure supply chain with integrity when they are faced with different regulations on supply chain intelligence? How do you make those obligations and incentives align with regulation, supply chain integrity and development interests? With the need for innovation, how do you get funding? The cut to international development is not only in the UK; it is in Belgium and the EU. It is everywhere.

Q38 **David Mundell:** Are you aware, Fred, of specific programmes that were UK funded but were cut?

Fred Bauma: I am aware of organisations in the humanitarian sector that recently lost part of their funding, including from the UK. That has affected their capacity to operate in DRC and had an impact on people who were benefiting from those resources.

Q39 **Chair:** Fred and Hélène, in the first panel, we heard very much about the impact on the ground with a lot of internally displaced civilians being forced off farmland, and there being the most horrendous humanitarian situation right now. On the other side, I hear that this is a mineral-rich country and that the Government could do much more to maximise their resources. It seems the international community has such a thirst or need for the critical minerals being extracted that it is comfortable turning a blind eye to the supply chain. How do we bring all that together again? There does not seem to be political will to put structures and good governance in place to make sure that the people benefit from their own resources and conflict is prevented. Do you have a simple solution?

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: At the beginning, I said you need to incentivise your own industry to comply. There are a lot of regulations on due diligence and so on, so you have to push industry to align. You want to secure the supply of critical minerals, because you need them for defence and energy transition. In Europe and the UK, there is a background of not wanting to do arms and to do things in a responsible way. In addition, you have the biggest gold market in the world. You want to protect it but you want to do it well. So you have to work with the incentive of the private sector on how to comply and invest at the beginning of the supply chain in order to do conflict prevention. This is why we are different to the US, where the top priority is securing the supply.

Fred Bauma: There are two levels. The first is what the UK can do outside DRC itself, which is what Hélène just said: you should incentivise your private sector and use regulation tools. There are many opportunities to pressure different sides of the UK. I am aware that there is a summit on financial trade in June, which may be a very good opportunity to put pressure on yours and other Governments on the issue of gold and other matters.

The second part is what can be done inside DRC. On that I will say a few things. First, there is a very vibrant civil society in DRC, both in the

mining sector and in the democratic space. The UK should make sure that civil society continues to have space where it can play its role because in the end that is what will change things. Secondly, the stability of DRC is very important for durable access of critical mining if we want to avoid the problem of illicit financial flow and so on. That stability requires investing in Government reform. I know people here at FCDO and the embassy are doing some work on that. The UK should continue to support democratic institutions and stability in DRC, which is an important requirement.

Thirdly, the UK should invest in co-ordination with other actors in dealing with DRC, because that is how effective your actions can be. We can discuss whether the Coalition of the Willing still holds, but in DRC, there are like-minded people who still align on issues of governance and so on.

Chair: Thank you. Fred. I will stop you there; Janet wants to come in for our very last question.

Q40 **Janet Daby:** Returning to the mines, in terms of the illegal extraction of gold and minerals from various small mines, it sounds like a very big operation. I want to get an understanding of how many troops are on the ground in terms of M23 and others, to get a sense of the scale of this type of operation. Hélène, are you aware—

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: Of the number of troops that are part of M23?

Janet Daby: Yes.

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: I do not have the latest figure. The last reliable information is from the UN group of experts. I do not know whether Fred knows that by heart.

Fred Bauma: I do not know if anybody has a clear number, but we are talking about 15,000 to 20,000 troops. If you count proxies and other groups in the region, it may be much more. Again, illegal, illicit exploitation is a very important subject that should be tackled, but I fully support what Hélène said in that you can also have a lot of impact by acting on enablers and financial networks that support it, because in the end that is where the problem is.

Hélène Helbig de Balzac: In terms of gold, in small-scale mining, more than 95% of trade is smuggled. The DRC Government just set up a new trading house and exported a couple of tonnes of small-scale gold mined in 2023, but the majority of production is smuggled, so avoids the revenue of the state.

Chair: Thank you very much. As you can tell by our questions, we appreciate how candid you have been to help us with this situation. It is intensely frustrating when people's greed seems to overrule humanitarian responsibilities. The points you make about acting across and in collaboration with Governments, and including civil society, are key to

restore this situation. Thank you very much for your time—we really appreciate it—and thank you for all the work that you continue to do on this.