

## **Senate Foreign Relations Committee**

Testimony by Ben Affleck, Founder of Eastern Congo Initiative  
Wednesday, February 26, 2014

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, distinguished members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, thank you for inviting me here today. My name is Ben Affleck. I am an actor and director and the founder of Eastern Congo Initiative, a grant-making and advocacy organization investing in and working with the people of eastern Congo. I am, to state the obvious, not a Congo expert. I am an American working to do my part for a country and a people I believe in and care deeply about.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge one of the people who inspired me to create ECI, the legendary Dr. Denis Mukwege. He is a two time Nobel Peace Prize nominee, and one of the bravest people I have ever known. His Panzi hospital has provided critical care to more than 30,000 women who have been raped and brutalized, and even in the face of persistent death threats, he remains a tireless advocate for women's rights. Although he is not testifying today, he has asked me to submit a statement for the record, on his behalf.

I would also like to acknowledge my friend and fellow ECI Board Member Cindy McCain for being an invaluable partner and champion for the Congolese people.

Fourteen months ago I was invited to testify before the House Armed Services Committee on this very topic.

At the time of my previous testimony, an armed militia known as the M23 had just taken over Goma, the capital of the North Kivu province. They subjected women to deplorable forms of sexual violence including rape, and forcibly recruited more than 120 children to fight or be killed. As a result of prolonged conflict, this year the UN reported that an estimated 2.9 million Congolese had been displaced internally and another 428,000 have sought refuge in neighboring countries.

Today, I'm thankful that I can tell a more hopeful story – one of small but powerful victories and cautious optimism. In November, through the combined efforts of the Congolese army and a special African-led UN peacekeeping force known as the Intervention Brigade, M23 surrendered and signed a peace agreement. This force is

comprised of troops from Tanzania, Malawi and South Africa. Their success combined with high-level and focused diplomacy reinforces our belief that when the international community acts, and the Congolese government rises to the moment, these challenges are in fact solvable.

If it were not for bold leadership by you, the U.S. Congress, together with the Obama administration, Congo would not be at this important turning point.

So, on behalf of our team in Goma and all of our Congolese partners, thank you for your commitment and your bi-partisan leadership.

Without overstating what has taken place since December 2012, I can say, unequivocally, that the situation in eastern Congo has improved:

1. Last year, both the U.N. and the Obama Administration appointed high-profile special envoys to the region.
2. In July, Secretary Kerry presided over a high-level UN Security Council meeting focused on security challenges in the Great Lakes region.
3. And on November 7th, M23 was forced to surrender.

I am also here today with an urgent message: Our work in DRC is not finished. We cannot risk diminished U.S. leadership at a time when lasting peace and stability are within reach.

In the last year, many of your colleagues visited Congo. In August, Senator Lindsey Graham led a Senate delegation to eastern Congo joined by Senators Chambliss, Blunt, Thune, Johanns and Barrasso alongside Cindy McCain. Senator Coons also traveled to Congo and has been a champion for increased U.S. engagement. And in December, Congressman Adam Smith traveled with ECI to meet with UN leadership and some of ECI's remarkable Congolese grantees.

The accomplishments over the last year were hard fought, but they are fragile and they are reversible.

Sadly, we've seen this before. Over the past decade, the international community has focused more on signing peace deals than on implementing the mandates found within those deals. Failed cycles of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of combatants have resulted in enormous suffering for the people of eastern Congo and severely slowed existing efforts toward military reform.

I would like to share with you five specific actions the U.S. Congress can take to help ensure we remain on a path to peace while saving U.S. tax dollars over the long term:

- First, urge Secretary Kerry to ensure Special Envoy Feingold has the personnel and support needed to successfully achieve his mission. And we commend President Obama and Secretary Kerry for selecting your former colleague, someone who brings extensive experience and credibility to the position.
- Second, call on U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power to support extending the Intervention Brigade past its March 31<sup>st</sup> expiration. We also recommend that this committee hold an oversight hearing to consider a sunset to MONUSCO that compels DRC to follow through and fully reform its security sector. After nearly 15 years and billions of dollars in appropriated funds, an endless MONUSCO mandate disincentivizes reform.
- Third, we request that Congress call on President Obama to directly engage with President Kabila to encourage him to make good on his critical commitment of long-overdue security sector reforms by establishing a clearly defined roadmap.
- Fourth, the U.S. must play a pivotal role and robustly participate in multilateral efforts to ensure that the Congolese government holds free, fair and timely local and national elections that respect the Congolese constitution, including strict observance of term limits.
- And finally, call upon USAID to scale up its economic development initiatives in eastern Congo. DRC's agriculture sector has massive potential, and ECI has

trained cocoa farmers to increase the quality and quantity of their production so it can be sold for a fair price on the global market. USAID should be encouraged to invest in more programs like these. Targeted investment in promising Congolese-driven solutions can and will drive economic growth and create jobs.

Let me share with you a final example of the extraordinary opportunity that exists in Congo. One of ECI's partners in our work with Congolese cocoa farmers is Theo Chocolate, the fastest growing organic, fair-trade chocolate company in the U.S. Today, Theo sources more than 50% of its cocoa from DRC. This year alone, more than 640 tons of cocoa will be purchased from the small holder farmers ECI supports – enough to make 9 million chocolate bars. This is neither charity nor aid, it's good business for the Congolese and its paying off for this American company. Our partner, Theo's CEO, Joe Whinney, joins us here today. Joe saw the potential of this country and its people, and it's now yielding extraordinary results for his business. Just imagine what can be achieved for both the Congolese people and American businesses with increased peace, stability and additional investments in this sector.

There's a Congolese proverb that says no matter how many times you strike a boulder with a knife, it will never turn to dust.

The Congolese people have been struck time and again by conflict, poverty and disease, and by an international community who looked upon Congo and called it hopeless. I hope you can see that it is not, and I hope you will commit again to the focused leadership that you've shown these past 14 months.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.