

Briefing Note – 06 June 2017

REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Conflict in Pool department



	Not required	Low	Moderate	Significant	Urgent
Need for international assistance			X		
Expected impact			X		
	Insignificant	Minor	Moderate	Significant	Major

Crisis overview

Since late September, several armed clashes between government forces and militia Nsilulu, also known as Ninja, have occurred in Pool Department. According to the government, more than 60 fatal attacks have been carried out (WFP 31/03/2017). According to the latest census in 2007, more than 126,000 people are living in these areas and have been affected by the conflict (INS Congo 2007). At least 23,000 people have been displaced since March 2016 (Caritas 30/11/2016). Internally displaced people are in dire need of shelter, food, and clean water. People are living with families, on church grounds, in public buildings or in overcrowded makeshift sites (UNHCR 12/2016). Following significant sustained fighting early 2017, thousands more people were estimated to be displaced. However, due to security issues and limited access given by the government, no independent confirmation has been possible, leaving uncertainty around the total number of displaced people.

Key findings

Anticipated scope and scale

Conflict in the Pool department has been an ongoing crisis for more than a year. Internally displaced people are in dire need of shelter, food, and clean water. It is expected that the number of IDPs will continue to increase as the security situation is deteriorating. Limited access will exacerbate the needs of the affected population.

Key priorities

- **Food:** 15,500 IDPs were in need of food assistance as of November 2016. Food stocks are exhausted and prices rising.
- **Health:** Health centres lack supplies, medicine, and personnel. A deterioration of the nutrition conditions has been observed and 200 cases of severe malnutrition reported. Fever and chickenpox are reported among children in the area.
- **Shelter:** At least 50% of the houses in the Pool department have been burned down or destroyed. Many IDPs fled their homes with nothing and are sleeping on concrete or dirt floors. Authorities have forced IDPs in makeshift sites to relocate to host families.
- **Protection:** Extra-judicial killings, beatings, torture, and sexual and gender-based violence, committed by both parties but predominantly by security forces, have been widely reported

Humanitarian constraints

Access is severely constrained: six districts are still inaccessible due to fighting – Mindouli, Mayama, Kinkala, Goma Tse-Tse, Mbandza-Ndounga, and Vindza. The government is severely limiting access to media and humanitarian organisations to Pool department. The lack of road infrastructure is also hampering humanitarian assistance as well as trade.

Limitations

Access is severely constrained in the Pool department, limiting information. Number of those still stranded in conflict-affected areas is unknown and little is known about their needs beyond anecdotal information.

Crisis impact

Conflict in the Pool department has been an ongoing crisis for more than a year. The government has blamed Pastor Ntumi and his 'Ninja' armed group for deadly raids on police, military, and local government facilities in the capital Brazzaville in April 2016, as he previously led a militia that fought President Denis Sassou Nguesso since the 1997 civil war. The violence followed a contested presidential election in which the opposition accused the government of fraud (Reuters 18/03/2017). These attacks resulted in the launch of military operations in southwest Pool, the Ninja leader's stronghold. Residential areas, schools, churches in Pool departments, as well as Soumona, Mayama, Vinza, and Kimba villages have been most heavily targeted (Amnesty International 18/04/2016). Clashes between security forces and Pasteur Ntumi combatants have been ongoing in six areas of the Pool department, in Mindouli, Mayama, Kinkala, Goma Tse-Tse, Mbandza-Ndounga, and Vindza (RFI 16/05/2017; Caritas 30/11/2016). The situation has continued to deteriorate following recent clashes in the south of the capital in March and mid-May. There have also been discoveries of stashes of arms in the region. The reasons behind this recent escalation remain unclear (ICG 03/2017; Les Echos du Congo Brazzaville 17/05/2017; 30/04/2017). According to the government, more than 60 attacks have been carried out since September (WFP 31/03/2017).

More than 126,000 people living in these areas, according to the last census in 2007, are believed to be affected by the conflict (INS Congo 2007; Caritas 30/11/2016). At least 23,000 people have been displaced since March 2016 (Caritas 30/11/2016). Internally displaced people are in dire need of shelter, food, and clean water. People are living with families, on church grounds, in public buildings, or in overcrowded makeshift sites (UNHCR 12/2016). Following significant sustained fighting early 2017, more population displacement resulted. However, due to security issues and limited access allowed by the government, no independent confirmation has been possible, leaving uncertainty around the total number of displaced people. It is expected that the number of IDPs will continue to increase as the security situation is further deteriorating (WFP 04/2017).

Affected areas	Resident population	IDPs
Pool	205,331	9,744
Mindouli	53,584	3,974
Kinkala	34,608	4,375
Mayama	7,036	625
Other districts	110,103	770
Brazzaville	1,373,382	10,000
Bouenza	309,073	3,056
Yamba	14,370	1,975
Nkayi	71,620	496
Other districts	223,083	585
Total	1,887,786	22,800

Source: INS Congo 2007; Caritas 30/11/2016

Food

According to the last needs assessment conducted in November 2016, 15,500 IDPs were in need of food assistance in the two accessible localities of Pool department (Kinkala and Mindouli) and in two locations in Bouenza department (Louteté and Yamba) (WFP 04/2017). Due to limited access, this figure has not been reassessed since then. Fields have been burned during fighting (RFI 25/05/2017). Food stocks were quickly exhausted since the end of 2016 and prices are increasing. Anecdotal reports show that a chicken wing now costs franc CFA 1500, requiring the daily income of three families to afford it (RFI 17/05/2017). Similarly, a spoon of salt now costs franc CFA 1,000 compared to 25 before the conflict (RFI 25/05/2017). IDPs have lost their livestock, seeds, and agricultural tools while fleeing (Caritas 30/11/2016). Host population has been supporting IDPs, resulting in the depletion of their resources and exposing them to greater food insecurity (WFP 04/2017).

Health

Residents of Pool department have limited access to healthcare as many state-employed health personnel fled the area (UNHCR 12/2016). Even if Kinkala, Mindouli and Kindamba hospitals are still open, they lack medicine, health supplies, and personnel (Caritas 30/11/2016). Fever, diarrhoea and malaria have been reported among children and adults. In Yamba, an outbreak of chickenpox has been reported (RFI 17/05/2017; 23/04/2016).

Nutrition

According to health workers in Pool department, a deterioration of the nutrition status of the children and pregnant and lactating women has been observed (WFP 04/2017). 200 cases of severe malnutrition have been reported in this area (RFI 17/05/2017). During the first four months of the year, in five health centres in Pool and Bouenza departments, 72 out of 405 babies (18%) were born weighing less than 2,500 grams (Les Echos du Congo Brazzaville 30/04/2017). A weight below 2,500 grams is a significant predictor of newborn health and survival and indicates long-term maternal malnutrition and poor healthcare (WHO 2006).

Shelter

At least 50% of the houses in the Pool department have been burned down or destroyed (US State Department 12/2016). Widespread looting has also been reported (RFI 25/05/2017). No shelter has been built to host IDPs. They either stay with host population, in churches or state buildings. Lack of privacy in those shelters has been reported as an issue for IDPs (Caritas 30/11/2016). Many fled their homes with nothing and are sleeping on concrete or dirt floors (UNHCR 12/2016). In Outete district, in southern area to Yamba town, about 2,000 IDPs have been forced by the government authorities to relocate to host families within the same area (RFI 17/05/2017).

Protection

About 100 civilian deaths have been reported in the affected area from April to December 2016, according to the national government-affiliated newspaper (US State Department 12/2016). Extra-judicial killings, beatings, torture and sexual and gender-based violence, committed by both parties but predominantly by security forces, have been widely reported (RFI 25/05/2017). Young men in the department are by default suspected of being affiliated with the 'Ninja' group and suffer harassment, extortion, arrest and beatings from security forces (Les Echos du Congo Brazzaville 30/05/2017).

WASH

IDPs are using unsafe water as limited water sources are available (RFI 17/05/2017). In Kinkala, Madzia, and Kibouende, there is an inadequate number of latrines, only one per spontaneous settlement. Open defecation has been widely reported. Washing facilities are not available on these sites (Caritas 30/11/2016; UNHCR 12/2016).

Livelihood

Agriculture is the main livelihood in the area and IDP farmers are prevented from accessing their fields and crops by the military and have no access to land in the area where they are now settled (RFI 17/05/2017). Due to the slowdown of the local economy and insecurity, both IDPs and the host population have been affected by a decrease in income (WFP 04/2017). Local tradesmen are often looted or ransomed at Ninjas' checkpoints, driving up food prices (Les Echos du Congo Brazzaville 04/2017).

Education

Many teachers have fled the area, preventing children from attending classes (UNHCR 12/2016).

Impact on critical infrastructure

Attacks on road and rail bridges have affected food and trade flows (UNHCR 12/2016). The destruction of two rail bridges on the Congo-Ocean intersection led to the interruption of rail traffic (Caritas 30/11/2016).

Humanitarian and operational constraints

Access is severely constrained: six districts are still inaccessible due to fighting – Mindouli, Mayama, Kinkala, Goma Tse-Tse, Mbandza-Ndounga, and Vindza (RFI 16/05/2017; Caritas 30/11/2016). Frequent ambushes and attacks against humanitarian convoys have been reported (RFI 25/05/2017). 'Coupeurs de route' (road bandits) are present on the National Road no. 1 (Ye–Mindouli-Pointe Noire), the departmental road Ngangalingolo-Kinkala-Mindouli as well as other departmental roads and robbery and assaults are frequent (Caritas 30/11/2016). On 26 May, buses travelling between Brazzaville and Pointe Noire were attacked and set on fire, and passengers robbed and killed (Les Echos du Congo Brazzaville 29/05/2017).

The government is severely limiting access to Pool department for media and humanitarian organisations. Laissez-passer (official government authorisations) delivered by government authorities are needed to access the department (RFI 25/05/2017). From 5 April to 6 May 2016, the government deliberately restricted the passage of relief supplies and medical aid by international humanitarian organisations (US State Department 12/2016).

The lack of road infrastructure is also hampering humanitarian assistance as well as trade. It takes five hours to cover the 70km between Brazzaville and Kinkala (CAP 2005). In 2004, ICRC and MSF-Hollande managed to access Kindamba district by plane and ensure an aerial bridge between Brazzaville and Kindamba, avoiding insecurity issues (Laboratoire Population Environnement Développement 30/07/2011).

Potential aggravating factors

Upcoming legislative elections

The Congolese will elect 151 deputies during the two rounds of the legislative elections, on 16 and 30 July (RFI 02/05/2017). For the first time, this election is coupled with local and municipal elections. In early May, the government started a revision of the electoral lists on which more than 2.1 million voters were registered for the presidential election of March 2016 (Africanews 13/05/2017). The electoral lists were already contested during the presidential elections in 2016 and tensions rose over their credibility (Mondafrique 04/01/2016).

The 2012 legislative elections were boycotted by the majority of the opposition, who considered that the conditions were not met for a democratic and transparent ballot. Already several opponents and local organisations have requested the delay of the elections, asking for the end of the fighting in Pool department, an inclusive dialogue, and new electoral governance regulations (RFI 30/05/2017; Les Echos du Congo Brazzaville 30/05/2017; VOA Afrique 18/05/2017).

Economic crisis

Due to the drop in oil revenues, Congo's main resource, the economic situation has deteriorated in 2016 with significant inflation rates. In 2017, the state budget is expected to be in deficit (RFI 30/12/2016). Due to the interruption of rail traffic, food and other commodities are no longer been transported from the Pool department, previously the food basket of the country, to Pointe Noire and other parts of the country (RFI 17/04/2017). Coal and gas supplies are becoming limited. Prices of cassava have increased in the capital, going from franc CFA 2,500 to 5,000 (RFI 25/05/2017).

Contextual information

Drivers of the current conflict

The presidential election on 20 March 2016 saw incumbent Sassou Nguesso retain the presidency for a third term despite international and national criticisms. On 4 April, suspected members of the Ninja militia, which was officially disbanded by their leader in 2008, were reported to have attacked police stations and administrative buildings in the capital during clashes with security forces, allegedly over the outcome of the election. Following these incidents, a heavily-armed government offensive targeted the Pool department, the support base for the Ninja militia, during their conflicts with the government in the 1990s and early 2000s (ACLED 02/2017).

Congo's civil war 1993-1999

Pool department has been the scene of many internal conflicts since 1993. The Civil war (1993-1999) involved three presidential candidates: incumbent president at the time Pascal Lissouba, today's President Sassou Nguesso, and Bernard Kolélas, mayor of Brazzaville at the time, all supported by different ethnic groups (Development Directorate General of the European Commission 02/2002). The conflict ended with the intervention of the Angolan army who supported Denis Sassou Nguesso's accession to the presidency in October 1997. Despite the call for reconciliation made by Sassou Nguesso, fighting ignited again in December 1998. The number of deaths remains unknown, with highest estimates reaching 400,000 - 10% of the Congolese population (NOFI 25/05/2017). The civil war left the country deeply divided, with the north supporting Sassou Nguesso, the centre-west Pascal Lissouba, and the south Kolélas (who passed away in 2009) (Development Directorate General of the European Commission 02/2002).

Pastor Ntumi and Ninja group

Frédéric Bintsamou, known as Pastor Ntumi, led the Nsilulus, sometimes referred to as "Ninja", a group of rebel fighters opposed to Sassou Nguesso between 1998 and 2005. Between 2007 and 2016, he became the leader of the National Council of Resistance. In April 2007, Ntumi signed an agreement dissolving the 5,000-strong group in exchange for the vice president position of the Congolese government. This crisis, known as the "Pool War", reignited following the re-election of Denis Sassou Nguesso in April 2016 when fighting resumed, allegedly in protest over Sassou Nguesso's third term. The origin of the resumed fighting is however unknown, both sides blaming each other (NOFI 25/05/2017).

Past displacement

Inhabitants of the Pool department have had to regularly flee the area due to fighting between government forces and local armed groups. It is the fourth time such population movement has occurred since 1993 (RFI 17/05/2017). 40,000 people fled the Pool region to Bas Congo in the Democratic Republic of Congo in December 1998 (UNHCR 26/01/1999).

Key characteristics

- **Demographic profile:** Women and children under five years represent 68% of the local population in Pool department. Children under 5 make up 17% of the population and people aged 50 and over represent 16% of the population (WFP 04/2017).
- **Health:** For every 100,000 live births, 410 women die from pregnancy related causes. The adolescent birth rate is 126.7 births per 1,000 women of ages 15-19 (WFP 04/2017).
- **Food insecurity.** Pool department is historically the food basket of the country. According to the 2013 WFP food security and vulnerability analysis, 15.7% of the population of Pool department and 11.9% of the population of Bouenza department were food insecure or vulnerable to food insecurity. 19.4% of female headed households are food insecure compared with 12.8% for households headed by men (WFP 04/2017).
- **Nutrition:** According to the 2015 Government and UNICEF Multi Indicator Cluster Survey, the prevalence of acute malnutrition for children under five before the crisis was estimated at 6.1% in the Pool department and at 6.6% in the Bouenza department. Chronic malnutrition rates were 23% and 23.3% respectively. According to the Global Hunger Index, the Republic of Congo has an alarming score which increased from 18.4 in 2005 to 26.6 in 2016 (WFP 04/2017).
- **Literacy:** In Congo, 39.7% of adult women reached at least a secondary level of education compared to 47% of their male counterparts (WFP 04/2017).

Response capacity

Local and national response capacity

Little information is available on government response. The Ministry of Social Affairs distributed some food to the displaced populations in October 2016 (RFI 17/05/2017).

International response capacity

Mattresses and window materials were distributed by UNHCR at the end of 2016 (RFI 17/05/2017).

Caritas have been distributing food in IDP settlements. The organisation is also building wells and latrines, as well as water treatment infrastructure. According to Caritas, assistance is at a lower level than during the civil war in 1998 (RFI 17/05/2017).

Since January 2017, Médecins d'Afrique, in partnership with UNFPA, are providing reproductive healthcare and support and care to victims of sexual violence (Les Echos du Congo Brazzaville 30/04/2017).

WFP will target 19,000 IDPs for cash-based transfers for six months (April- October) and another 3,000 for three months. Supplementary rations to treat moderate acute malnutrition will be provided to 450 children under 5 and 550 pregnant and lactating women (WFP 04/2017).

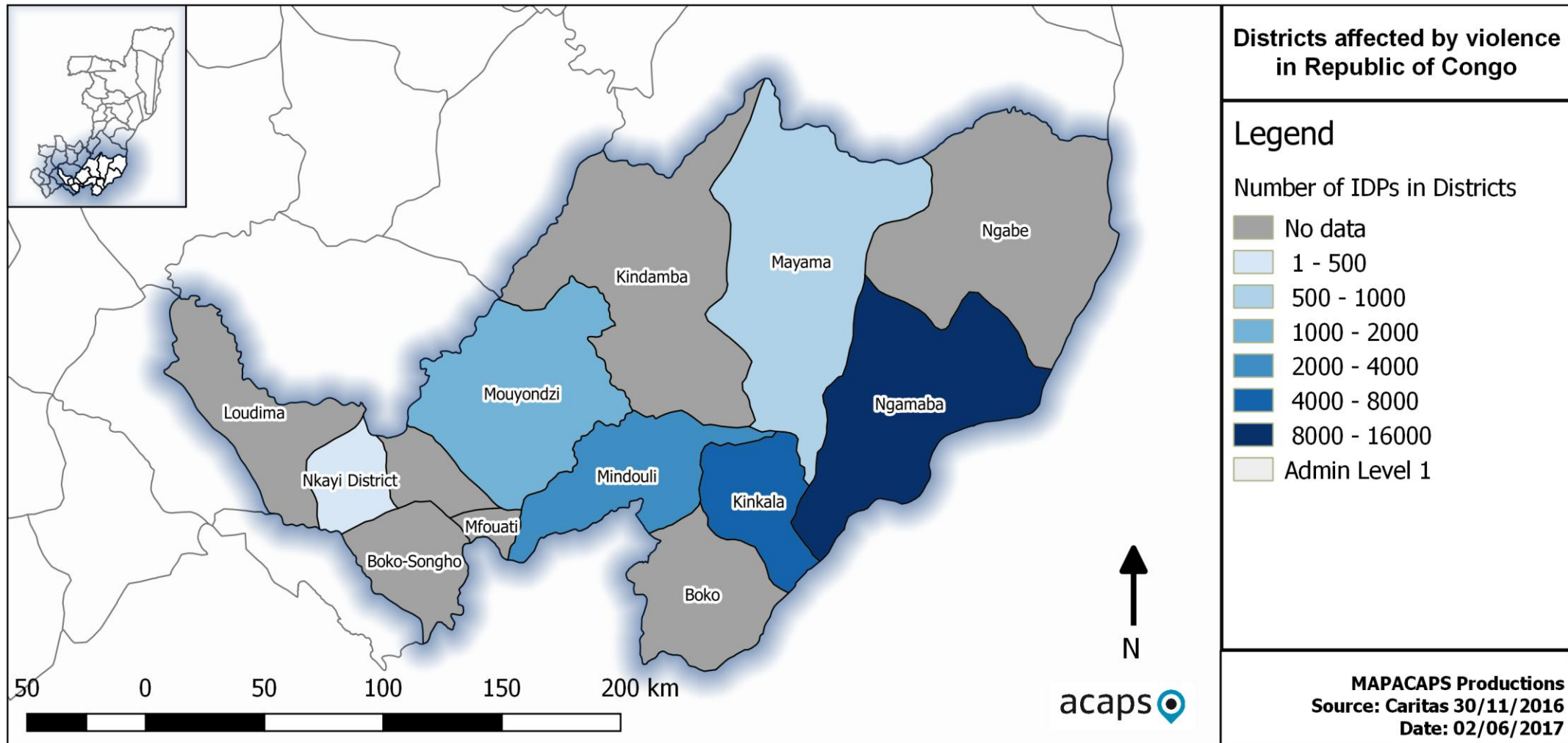
Population coping mechanisms

As a result of food stocks running low, IDPs have been skipping meals (RFI 17/05/2017). According to health workers in Pool department, IDPs are mainly eating mangoes and other seasonal wild food (WFP 04/2017). Host families have shared their resources with IDPs (WFP 04/2017).

Information gaps and needs

- Information on inaccessible areas is difficult to obtain. The number of people displaced within the Pool department and the population still living in the conflict-affected areas are unknown, as are their sectoral needs.
- Estimates on cases of severe malnutrition are inconsistent.
- Casualty figures are uncertain.

Map of affected areas in Republic of Congo



Source: Caritas 30/11/2016