

**Testimony of Ambassador Johnnie Carson
Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health
Tuesday, May 25, 2010, 10:00 a.m.**

Chairman Payne, Ranking Member Smith, and Members of the Committee:

I welcome the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss “The Great Lakes Region: Current Conditions and U.S. Policy.”

The countries of the Great Lakes region are inextricably linked. Although each has its own unique challenges, events in one country invariably affect the others, and often the wider region, as well. We spend a significant amount of diplomatic time and attention working on issues associated with the Great Lakes. In just the past two months, dozens of senior officials from the Africa Bureau and the Department of State have traveled to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi. In addition to travel in the region, Senior Advisor for the Great Lakes region Howard Wolpe – a former chairman of this sub-committee and a key member of my team – has traveled to Europe and New York to consult with our international partners on issues of common interest. And of course, last August, Secretary Clinton made her important and historic trip to the

DRC that continues to pay dividends in our bilateral relationship with that critical country.

These visits underline our commitment to helping regional governments, both individually and in cooperation with one another, resolve the domestic and cross-border issues that challenge regional security and stability and continue to place millions of civilians at risk. Addressing these issues has been, and continues to be, a slow and daunting process – certainly more so than we would like – but the situation has improved as the countries in the region have renewed and strengthened ties amongst themselves, and we remain dedicated to doing what we can to keep that positive momentum going.

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Central to our efforts is improving the security situation in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The continuing presence of illegal armed groups has been exacerbated by the lack of state authority throughout much of the east. The DRC military (FARDC) is ineffective and abusive; the judicial and penal systems are broken; and the cycle of impunity rather than accountability reigns. The illegal exploitation of natural resources continues to fund the conflict. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) remains at crisis levels. Local elections have been postponed to 2012, further delaying the people's opportunity to have a

say in the government that most directly affects them. The UN Mission in the DRC (MONUC), the only bulwark between the current situation and absolute chaos, is stretched beyond its limits and the DRC government is calling for a reduction in the mission's presence.

I met with DRC President Joseph Kabila in Kinshasa on April 16 to discuss many of these issues. I expressed our grave concern about the dangerous security vacuum that would result if MONUC left based on an arbitrary date rather than the situation on the ground. I stressed that it would be premature and unwise for MONUC to leave before the security situation had dramatically improved and before the DRC security services were sufficiently trained and capable of protecting civilians. I am pleased to report that President Kabila was receptive to my concerns and has softened his tone in demanding MONUC's withdrawal.

It is also very important to recognize, I think, that the DRC recently took an encouraging step regarding five Congolese military officers whose impunity for serious abuses Secretary Clinton raised directly with President Kabila in August. The government has now arrested the highest-ranking member of this group, a general. Last year, President Kabila announced a zero-tolerance policy for both sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and corruption. Although we would like to see stronger implementation of this policy, we are mildly encouraged by

these initial moves. President Kabila has also voiced strong support for our USG-funded and -implemented program to train a light infantry battalion (LIB) in Kisangani. In addition to normal military training, one of the major goals of this program is to improve the human rights practices of the Congolese military (FARDC).

During my recent trip, I visited Kisangani, met the local FARDC commander, observed our training program, and held discussions with members of the public who were wary about our intentions. I have no delusions about what we are doing. Improving the FARDC will be a steep uphill climb and our training in Kisangani is only one small part of what is required – and that is a much larger, long-term, multi-donor-supported security sector reform process. We are coordinating closely with our international partners as well as with President Kabila and his government, and I believe that our combined efforts will make progress.

Military reform alone will not cure what ails the Congo. Soldiers are sometimes the most visible rapists, but they are not alone. Perpetrators of all types benefit from a fundamental lack of accountability and a broken justice system that has inadequate personnel and resources to conduct investigations and effective prosecutions. Corruption and political interference further undermine the process,

as the accused are either protected by military or political “godfathers” or else pay bribes to avoid being held accountable for their crimes.

It is no coincidence that the three issues I just touched on – sexual and gender-based violence, security sector reform, and corruption – were three of the five themes identified by the Secretary and President Kabila as areas on which our two governments could and should more closely cooperate. (The other two were economic governance and agricultural growth and food security.)

We deployed five assessment teams to the DRC between December 2009 and February 2010 to review the five areas discussed by Secretary Clinton and President Kabila. We did this with significant support from the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) and experts from several U.S. Government agencies. The teams conducted two-week visits during which they met with a wide array of stakeholders and then drafted reports with recommendations for greater U.S.-Congolese cooperation. We have reviewed these and are pursuing with the DRC government those recommendations we deem most likely to achieve short-term but important results.

Let me take a moment here to note in particular two issues the assessment teams looked at that I know are of specific interest to this Committee: (1) sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and (2) conflict minerals.

On SGBV, let me repeat something Secretary Clinton has often said: Women's rights and women's issues cannot be an afterthought in our foreign policy; they must factor centrally in how we look at the world. We have made women a cornerstone of our foreign policy not only because we think it's the right thing to do, but also because it's the smart thing to do. We have consistently called for respect of women's rights and increased participation of women in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction efforts, as both women's protection and participation are linked to maintaining international peace and security. Sexual violence harms not merely single individuals, but it also undermines our fundamental values as a society.

There are few places in the world where the plight of women needs greater or more urgent attention than the DRC. Sexual violence and the brutal intimidation of women have become frighteningly commonplace.

My recent visit to the Congo overlapped with that of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's newly appointed Special Representative (SRSG) for Sexual Violence and Armed Conflict, Margot Wallstrom. Secretary Clinton presided over the Security Council session in September 2009 at which the Resolution creating SRSG Wallstrom's position was adopted, and I was particularly pleased that the SRSG chose the DRC as a top item on her agenda. She and I had an opportunity to

discuss SGBV, its causes and its ramifications – issues I also discussed with the Congolese Minister of Gender and numerous NGO representatives. We were all in agreement about the need to do more on all aspects of this issue: prevention of violence (including through education of both boys and girls from an early age), care and treatment for survivors (both men and women, with special attention to children), and prosecution of perpetrators. The United States has been working assiduously on all of these, and we will continue to do so.

Regarding conflict minerals in the eastern DRC: Over the past year and a half, the Administration has stepped-up its engagement on this issue.

Together with the DRC government, neighboring states and the international community, we are working to stem the illegal exploitation of, and trade in Congolese minerals, the profits from which are used to finance various armed groups operating in the DRC. Human rights abuses – including killings, rape, exploitative child labor, and various forms of trafficking-in-persons (e.g., debt bondage and forced prostitution) – abound in and around mining sites. At roadblocks along trade routes, armed individuals and groups engage in rent-seeking – exacting so-called “taxes” from traders (including legitimate traders) and thus lessening the miners’ and traders’ income. And because some of these minerals are leaving the country via unofficial routes and methods, the DRC is

precluded from collecting legal taxes and duties that the Congolese economy could use.

To try to address the minerals issue more holistically, we have put together a “Strategic Action Plan for Conflict Minerals in the Eastern DRC,” which the Secretary approved on March 22. This plan includes short-, medium- and long-term diplomatic and programmatic approaches. On May 14, as a part of this plan, I participated in a meeting with representatives from several industries to encourage them to ensure that their supply chains promote legitimate minerals trade and are free from conflict minerals. We are also working with both the OECD and UN Security Council Group of Experts on the DRC to develop practical due diligence guidance for the private sector in the DRC and other conflict-affected areas.

Our attention to this issue is not new, however. For nearly a year and a half, we have participated in a Great Lakes Contact Group task force that was established to examine these questions. Moreover, both the Congolese government itself – through the establishment of official trading centers – and the regional states via the mechanism of the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region – are likewise looking to find lasting solutions.

I’d like to touch briefly on the Congolese political situation. During my meeting with President Kabila, I stressed to him the importance and urgency of

organizing and adhering to the country's elections calendar. There are two different sets of elections on the horizon: local and national. The local elections, originally scheduled for 2008, have been repeatedly postponed. The DRC government recently announced that the local elections will now occur in two phases, in 2012 and 2013. It is regrettable that the Congolese people, who have already waited so long to have a more direct voice in local affairs, will have to wait another two to three years, but we will continue to encourage the government to abide by this latest schedule. National polls, including elections for the national parliament and for president, these are now slated for September 2011. President Kabila is eligible to run for a second five-year term, having been elected in 2006, and we believe that he will almost certainly run.

Of course, others will as well, and I appreciated the opportunity my visit afforded me to meet with key political leaders outside the government to hear their thoughts about how they expect the electoral process to unfold. While some did express concerns about the degree to which DRC government resources and control of the media will give the ruling party a possibly unfair advantage, none gave any indication that they intend to boycott the elections. On the contrary, they are looking forward to participating in this next step on the DRC's path to democracy.

The government has made a commitment that all upcoming elections will be free, democratic and transparent, which we welcome. But they will also be expensive and logistically difficult in such a large country with so little infrastructure. Significant international support will be imperative in 2011, just as it was in 2006.

While we continue to look ahead towards elections, I was also reminded during my visit of the serious, ongoing humanitarian crisis that continues in many parts of the DRC. In North and South Kivu provinces, despite some progress, armed conflict and widespread instability remain a fact of life. The continuing presence of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) remains a key factor in that instability, as the FDLR – though weakened over the past year – continues to prey on the local population. In the DRC's northeastern Orientale Province, a relatively small number of remaining Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) fighters continue to kill and prey on civilian populations, destabilizing large areas and causing extensive civilian displacement. Further west, the DRC government and MONUC have responded to a new rebellion in Equateur Province, where violent conflict since last fall has forced 200,000 Congolese from their homes, including some 125,000 who have fled to the neighboring Republic of Congo. Addressing root causes of conflict in these areas and responding to the vast humanitarian need has remained an imperative of our efforts in the DRC, but much

remains to be done. There is no one or easy or quick solution to the conflict and continuing humanitarian crisis in the DRC.

Rwanda

As I mentioned at the beginning of my testimony, the countries of the region are inextricably linked. Refugees from Rwanda's genocide (as well as perpetrators of it) fled across the border into the DRC, and the FDLR, no longer able to flex its muscle in Rwanda, continues to plunder the DRC.

Our policy priority in Rwanda is to further internal stability and social cohesion by promoting national reconciliation, economic growth, good governance, justice, and democratic values. We appreciate, in the context of the most tragic event in recent history –the genocide – the need for security, stability, and reconciliation is critical. But long-term stability is best promoted by democratic governance and respect for human rights.

The presidential elections in Rwanda this August are expected to be peaceful and non-violent. However, the security environment ahead of the elections is of concern. We strongly condemn the series of recent grenade attacks in Kigali that have caused numerous casualties as well as anxiety and unease in the population in the run-up to the elections.

The political environment ahead of the election has been riddled by a series of worrying actions taken by the Government of Rwanda, which appear to be attempts to restrict the freedom of expression. In a period of months, the Government of Rwanda has suspended two newspapers, revoked the work permit and denied the visa of a Human Rights Watch researcher, and arrested (and subsequently released on bail) opposition leader Victoire Ingabire, who has been linked to the FDLR. Despite multiple attempts, two political parties – the Green Party and FDU Inkingi – have still been unable to register. Dissent within the ruling party also appears to have surfaced.

We have relayed our concerns about these developments to the Government of Rwanda, urging senior government leaders to respect freedoms of expression, press, association, and assembly. In particular, we have pressed leaders to allow all international and domestic non-governmental organizations and media to operate and report freely. We have also urged leaders to treat Victoire Ingabire in accordance with international law, ensure due process, and give her a speedy, fair, and transparent trial. We have urged the Government of Rwanda and all regional and international partners to work together to achieve free, fair, and peaceful elections that the people of Rwanda deserve.

Leading up to the elections, the United States Government has supported a program that provides organizational and policy-development skills to political party leaders from all ten parties in Rwanda. The USG also plans to send approximately a dozen teams to observe the elections.

Burundi

We are keeping a close eye on upcoming elections throughout the region. Burundi has just held the first of five separate elections for local and national level institutions. This election marathon will continue through September 7, with important presidential elections on June 28 and national assembly elections on July 23.

Through our foreign assistance and public diplomacy programming, as well as our direct observation of the electoral process, we have regularly seized public and private opportunities to reinforce the message, across a broad political spectrum, that credible elections and legitimate transfer of power are necessary for Burundi's long-term stability and economic growth. Credible elections and a peaceful post-election transfer of power will also enable a broader and deeper U.S.-Burundian partnership in the future.

Burundians and international observers alike are hopeful that all the elections will be conducted in a free, fair, and peaceful manner. There is no armed rebellion. The last rebel group (the FNL) has demobilized, largely integrated into the security forces and government, and formed a political party. The political arena is diverse and open, with twenty-three political parties competing in the first (communal level) elections on May 24; six of these parties are competing nationwide. The political parties appear satisfied with the neutral and transparent conduct of the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI). The media are relatively free and professional and have mobilized to pool resources and share their election coverage. Burundian civil society has mobilized to observe the elections and to monitor outbreaks of violence.

And, all political parties, including the ruling party/government, have welcomed international observers. The U.S. Embassy in Bujumbura, reinforced by several senior State Department officers from Washington, is deploying observers throughout the country. African states and regional organizations – including the African Union, East African Community, International Conference of the Great Lakes Region and European Union – plan to observe the elections. The United

Nations Integrated Office in Burundi (BINUB) is coordinating donor assistance to the electoral process.

Despite our optimistic scenario, there are still approximately 200,000 weapons in circulation in the country and many uneducated, unemployed, frustrated and young people [*over half the population is under the age of 25*] who are particularly susceptible to political manipulation. Members of the ruling party at all levels have used government resources and state authority for elections advantage, and some have intimidated opponents. There have already been repeated – and sometimes violent – clashes between the members of the five major rival parties. Most alarming, two members of the Movement for Solidarity and Democracy (MSD) party, who were active at a May 13 rally, were murdered the same day.

The U.S. Government has consistently and repeatedly cautioned the government's leadership as well as leaders of all the political parties about the need to avoid intimidation, provocation and violence. In addition, we have called on the government security forces and prosecutors to accelerate the investigations and prosecutions of those responsible for these election-related incidents, as well as those responsible for other politically motivated crimes committed in the past year,

such as the April 2009 murder of the vice chairman of the National Anti-Corruption and Economic Malpractice Agency.

The Government of Burundi's recent decision to expel a Human Rights Watch (HRW) researcher, on the grounds that a recent HRW report is biased against the government and the ruling party, is disturbing. It appears to be another step on the part of the government and ruling party to clamp down on foreign and domestic NGOs that it considers to be a form of unwelcome political opposition. We have conveyed our concerns to Burundian officials in both Washington and Bujumbura, and have urged the government to reconsider its decisions and to engage in constructive dialogue with NGOs and civil society. A healthy and functioning civil society is fundamental to the long-term sustainability of peace, good governance, and economic growth in Burundi.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.