



CONGOLESE
COMMUNITY PROFILE

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This booklet has been compiled by the national office of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to assist state and territory governments, service providers and other key settlement stakeholders to settle new entrants under Australia's Humanitarian Programme.

Accurate information about the pre-arrival experiences of refugees, including environmental conditions in camps, can be difficult to obtain and verify. While every effort has been made to ensure this document is factually correct, it may contain some inaccuracies.

Refugee experiences can vary considerably between individuals. Readers should note that this document is intended to provide a general background of the possible experiences of arrivals under the Humanitarian Programme. Information presented here may not always be applicable to individuals within the community in Australia or to new arrivals.

Where possible, more detailed information on specific groups of arrivals will be provided to service providers as an adjunct to this and other Community Profiles.

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The information provided in this document does not necessarily represent the views of the Commonwealth or its employees.

Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is located in the Central Africa region. The country is sometimes referred to as Congo-Kinshasa (after the capital city, Kinshasa), to distinguish it from its neighbour, Republic of the Congo (ROC, or Congo-Brazzaville). While people from both countries refer to themselves as 'Congolese', when used in this profile, 'Congolese' refers only to people from DRC¹.

DRC has a small coastline on the South Atlantic Ocean and shares borders with Angola, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. The country has experienced significant conflict and instability since gaining independence from Belgian rule in 1960.

The country was known as Zaire from the period 1965 to 1997, under the presidency of Colonel Joseph Mobutu (known as Mobutu Sese Soku), but was renamed the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1997 following the toppling of the Mobutu regime in a rebellion led by Laurent Kabila.

In August 1998, a regional war broke out between the DRC Government and Ugandan- and Rwandan- backed rebels. As a result, around 1.8 million Congolese were internally displaced and around 300 000 fled to neighbouring countries. Laurent Kabila was assassinated in 2001 and succeeded as president by his son Joseph Kabila. The new president began overtures to end the war and a peace accord was signed in South Africa in 2002. However, much of the country remains unstable, and it is estimated that since it started in 1998, the conflict in DRC has killed up to four million people.

As of March 2005, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that around 320 000 refugees from DRC were dispersed among the countries of Angola, Benin, Central African Republic, Cameroon, Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia, with significant numbers located in Tanzania (around 155 000), Zambia (around 66 000), Republic of the Congo (around 58 000) and Uganda (around 18 000).

¹ Data in this profile drawn from the department's Settlement Database (SDB) incorporates all entrants recorded as being born in DRC, Zaire and Republic of the Congo. Australia is currently resettling a small number of refugees born in Republic of the Congo, some of whom are likely to be children of parents who have fled from DRC.

Community in Australia

The Congolese community in Australia is very small - the 2001 Census identified around 270 residents of Australia who were born in DRC. In 2004-05, humanitarian entrants from DRC were for the first time one of the top 10 groups assisted through the department's Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS).

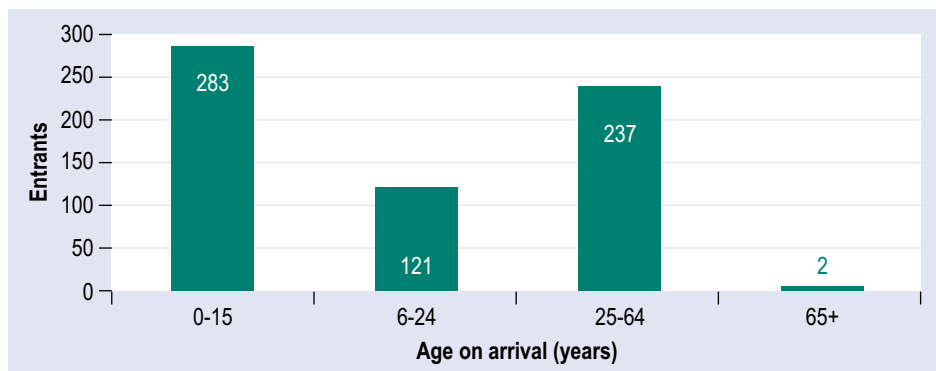
Over the years 2000-05, the department's Settlement Database (SDB) has recorded around 640 entrants to Australia who were born in DRC², 95 per cent of whom were humanitarian entrants. Figure 1 shows settlement locations of members of the Congolese community over that period. For privacy reasons, locations where fewer than 20 entrants have settled are not specified.

Figure 1. Settlement location, 2000-05

Location	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	VIC	WA
No. of entrants	107	24	63	153	79	207

Figure 2 shows the age of Congolese entrants on their arrival in Australia. A large proportion of entrants (44 per cent) were under 15 years old.

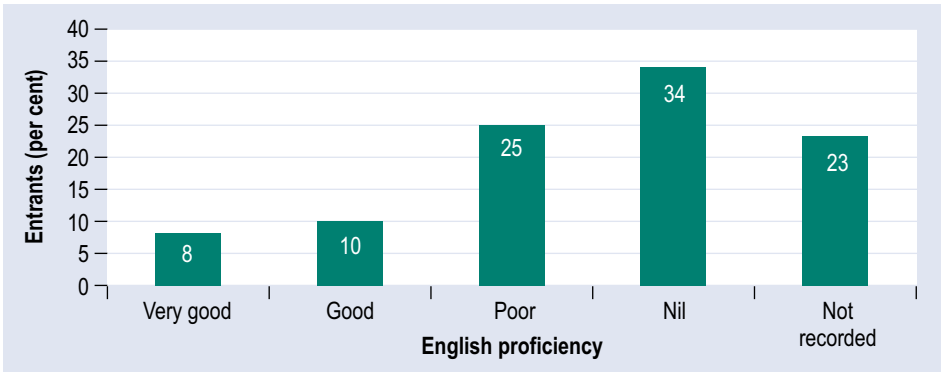
Figure 2. Age of entrants, 2000-05



² Readers should note that data on country of birth is not always a reliable indicator of the social, cultural or ethnic background of humanitarian entrants. There is often a great deal of cross-border movement in world regions affected by instability, and conflicts between neighbouring countries can result in borders moving over time. Additionally, children born in one country may have parents who were born in a different country. These children are likely to share the cultural, ethnic or linguistic characteristics of their parent's country of birth rather than their own.

Figure 3 shows the self-reported English proficiency of entrants from DRC. 59 per cent of entrants reported having either 'poor' or 'nil' English language skills.

Figure 3. Self-reported English proficiency, 2000-05



37 per cent of entrants from DRC over the years 2000-05 reported Swahili as their main language, with a further 33 per cent reporting French (Figure 4). Of the remaining 29 per cent, most spoke African languages that were undefined or not specified, with a very small proportion reporting Lingala, Kirundi and English as their main language.

Figure 4. Main language of Congolese entrants, 2000-05

Main language	Number of entrants	Per cent
Swahili	239	37
French	215	33
Other	189	29

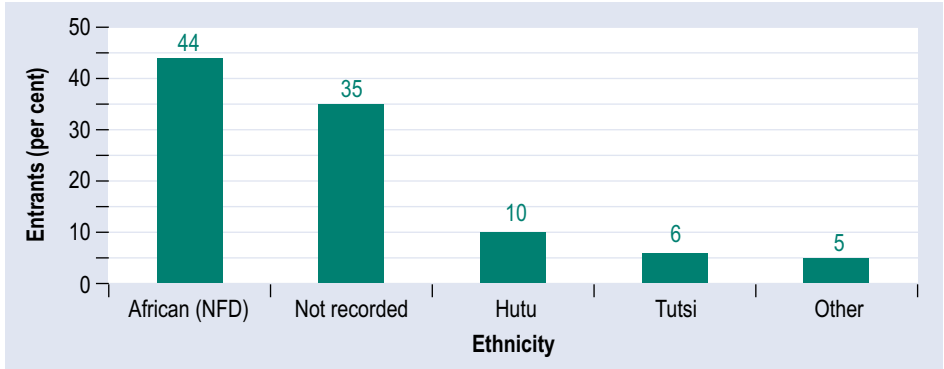
Figure 5 shows that the majority of entrants were Christian (predominantly not further defined), with a small proportion of Muslims and 'other religions' (possibly traditional religions).

Figure 5. Religion of Congolese entrants, 2000-05

Religion	Number of entrants	Per cent
Christian	556	86
Other religion	64	10
Islam	23	4

The large number of ethnic groups in DRC (estimated to be between 200-250) means that separate entry codes are not available in the Settlement Database. For this reason, the ethnicity of most Congolese entrants was recorded as 'African', and not recorded for many others (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Ethnicity of Congolese arrivals, 2000-05



Around 10 per cent of arrivals were identified as Hutu and six per cent as Tutsi. It should be noted that these are not generally seen as Congolese ethnicities – these entrants may be children of marriages between Congolese and Rwandan/ Burundian parents. Other ethnicities reported in small numbers were Luba, Kasai, Congo and Bantu.

Pre-arrival experiences

Information on the pre-arrival experiences of humanitarian entrants can be difficult to obtain. Refugee camps in the Central Africa region are often difficult to access and conditions vary widely from camp to camp.

Camp sizes vary greatly. Some camps give shelter to tens of thousands of people and some a few thousand. Some camps provide basic accommodation and services, like health clinics, education and employment programmes, while others do not have the resources. Camp residents may be able to maintain some independence through small-scale farming and trade. In other areas, services for residents are limited and residents may be entirely dependent on food rations for survival.

Refugees may have moved between different camps due to camp closures, fleeing attack or seeking better conditions. Some Congolese were forced to flee their country more than once, having left DRC in 1996, returning in mid 1998 only to seek refuge in other countries again in late 1998 when further violence erupted.

Congolese entrants may have spent up to a decade living in camps. During this time they may have experienced loss of independence and self-determination.

Not all Congolese refugees come from camps – many refugees established themselves in urban areas following flight from their country. These entrants may be more familiar with urban lifestyles and technology but are still likely to have been living in poverty with limited education and employment opportunities and inadequate healthcare.

Settlement considerations

Given the community's small size and recency of arrival, the Congolese community as a whole is likely to experience significant challenges in assisting new arrivals to settle. Additionally, given the recency of most arrivals, both settlement and mainstream service providers are likely to be largely unfamiliar with the needs of this group.

Entrants from DRC are likely to have limited or no English language skills and will thus require translating and interpreting services. Some may speak French.

The age profile of entrants over the last five years shows a large proportion of entrants are children, youth or young adults (63 per cent were under the age of 25 on arrival, and 44 per cent under 15). This suggests a need to focus on education and training services for young Congolese entrants. By law, primary school is compulsory and free in DRC. In reality, there are not enough schools or teachers. As a result, these entrants may have limited experience of formal education and limited or no literacy and numeracy skills. Young entrants may require assistance to understand formal schooling practices in Australia and to develop basic literacy and numeracy skills necessary for further learning.

Family size is another consideration, particularly in provision of appropriate housing. Children are seen as a sign of prosperity in DRC and families are often larger than the Australian norm. DRC families may also include extended family such as uncles and aunts.

Conflicts in DRC have been extreme and brutal. Both militia groups and national forces have targeted civilian homes, hospitals, schools and communities. Forced recruitment of child soldiers has been common. Many entrants have experienced highly traumatic events, including physical violence against themselves, family members and friends.

Entrants may need assistance to deal with the effects of torture and trauma, in addition to the general stresses of migration, separation from family and culture shock. Entrants may also be concerned about the safety of family left behind.

Male entrants from rural areas of DRC may be familiar with basic farming practices, although will probably not be used to working with farming machinery. Women from rural areas may also have skills in growing small food crops but are unlikely to have any formal employment history. In urban areas of DRC, unemployment is high. However, male entrants may have experience in a range of fields, including tailoring or shoe repair, construction, taxi and bus driving and small-scale retail. Female entrants may also have experience in informal, small-scale retail.

Living conditions in DRC, particularly rural areas, are very different to conditions in Australia. Entrants may be unfamiliar with Australian housing and require assistance to learn about common household equipment and practices. Entrants may also be used to a barter economy and may need assistance to learn about aspects of financial management such as banking and budgeting.



Flag of the Democratic Republic of Congo

DRC country background

Location

DRC is located in the Central Africa region and is the third largest country in Africa, after Sudan and Algeria. It has a small coastline in the west (37 kilometres long) where the Congo River flows into the Atlantic Ocean. DRC shares borders with Angola, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

The capital city, Kinshasa, sits on the western border. It is separated from Brazzaville, the capital of neighbouring Republic of the Congo, by a lake-like expanse of the Congo River called Pool Malebo.



DRC (World Fact Book)



Cultural Profiles Project (Canadian Government)

Climate and topography

The country has a low-lying plateau at its centre with mountains in the east and south highlands. Lake Tanganyika lies along DRC's eastern border. The Congo River, Africa's second largest after the Nile and the country's most important waterway, is prone to seasonal flooding.

DRC straddles the equator and its climate is tropical.

It is hot and humid in the equatorial river basin, cooler and drier in the southern highlands, and cooler and wetter in the eastern highlands. In areas north of the equator, the wet season runs from April to October and the dry season from December to February.

In those areas south of the equator, the wet season runs from November to March and the dry season from April to October.

Most of the country, including the central river basin and the eastern highlands, is covered by thick tropical rainforest. Southern DRC is covered by savannah (grasslands). These areas get little or no rainfall for significant periods each year and are subject to periodic drought. Around three per cent of the country is under cultivation and another seven per cent is devoted to pasture.

Population

As at May 2006, DRC’s population was approximately 62 million. Average life expectancy at birth was approximately 51 years (slightly higher for females and lower for males). A large proportion of the population is young – around 47 per cent are under 14 years (Figure 7). The median age was 16.2 years, and the infant mortality rate around 89 deaths per 1000 live births.

Figure 7. DRC age distribution, 2005

Age	0 – 14 years	15 – 64 years	Over 65 years
Per cent of population	47.4	50.1	2.5

In 2005, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ranked DRC as 167th in its Human Development Report (out of 177 countries). The UN Human Development Index combines measures such as life expectancy, literacy and income to provide a broad view of a country’s development.

Ethnicity

There are between 200-250 ethnic groups in DRC, each with different languages or dialects and customs.

The majority groups are Bantu (including the Mongo, Luba and Kongo/Congo tribes) and the Mangbetu-Azande (Hamitic). These two ethnic groups make up about 45 per cent of the population.

Ethnicity, citizenship and nationality are complex factors. Nationality, for example, can be seen as an artificial construct, having been created through the imposition of colonial rule without regard to ethnic boundaries. People are likely to identify themselves in relation to their tribal or ethnic backgrounds and the region from which they come.

Relationships between ethnic groups in DRC vary. During the country's turbulent recent history, many competing interests have at times encouraged and exploited ethnic tensions to gain political, military and economic power.

Language


Up to 250 different African languages are spoken in DRC, most belonging to the Bantu family. The main languages spoken are Lingala (a lingua franca trade language), Kikongo, Kingwana (a form of Swahili), and Tshiluba.

French is the country's official language, used in government, secondary and tertiary education. However, only a small proportion of the population uses French as a working language - most speak local languages. Many Congolese can communicate in a number of different local languages.

Family

African society is traditionally organised by kinship groups. Family encompasses a wide group of relatives, including extended family such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces, and cousins. Congolese people take pride in coming from a good family, and are taught to contribute to the family's well being by respecting their elders and providing for family members. It is common for people to take in nephews and nieces if necessary.

The legal age for marriage in DRC is 18 years, although in rural areas, girls may be prepared for marriage at a much earlier age. While polygamy is illegal, the practice continues.



In the past, marriages were often arranged by the family, although this is becoming less common. When a couple marries, the man may pay a 'bride-price' to the bride's parents, which will be returned if the marriage ends in divorce. Couples may have a number of wedding ceremonies, including a civil service, a family celebration with traditional exchanges of gifts, and a church ceremony. Particularly in rural areas, festivities can last for days, with singing and dancing.

Marriage is seen as a union between two families rather than just two individuals, and is an important factor in developing kinship ties and community strength. For this reason, divorce, while legal, is uncommon. In cases of family conflict, negotiation and mediation to maintain the relationship is the preferred approach, often by respected elders and other family members.

Gender

Gender roles are traditional, particularly in rural areas. Men undertake hunting, clearing the forest and much of the important decision-making. Women tend to crops, prepare meals, care for children and look after the home. Women's legal rights are limited – married women cannot open a bank account, obtain a passport or rent or sell property without their husband's permission.

Congolese people can be very conscientious about physical contact between sexes. Personal relationships are a private matter and public displays of affection are not encouraged. It may also be seen as socially unacceptable for women to go out alone in the evenings.

Throughout the conflict in DRC, women and girls have been particularly vulnerable to violence and assault. Systematic rape continues to be used as a weapon of war – many women have suffered sexual assault and slavery, and deliberate infection with HIV.

Children

Families are usually large, as children are considered a sign of prosperity both for the family and the community. Contraception is not commonly practised and may be frowned upon, as it deprives the community of growth. In early 2006, the fertility rate was estimated at around 6.5 children per woman.

As with many African cultures, child rearing is often a community responsibility, with all adults in the community taking a role in providing guidance, discipline and protection. Children are expected to be obedient and respectful of elders, and may not be consulted on decisions made about them.

There has been an increase in violence against children in DRC as a result of the conflict. Many factions have used child soldiers, some as young as 10 years old. Some accounts suggest that up to one third of the country's children have been forced to take up arms at some stage during the conflict.

Religion

Historically, Christian missionaries were very active in DRC, and around 70 per cent of the population follows Christian beliefs (50 per cent Roman Catholic and 20 per cent Protestant). Around 10 per cent of the population is Muslim and the remaining 20 per cent follow either traditional or syncretic beliefs (churches blending traditional and Christian beliefs).

While freedom of religion was guaranteed under the 1967 constitution, President Mobutu's authenticity program, which encouraged a return to African traditions, saw religious instruction banned in schools, Christian names replaced by African ones, and the secularisation of religious holidays. Today, the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Church of Christ, the Kimbanguist Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Muslim and Jewish faiths are officially recognised.

Dress

Congolese people take pride in their appearance and are generally modestly dressed. Men's clothing tends to be more westernised, while women may wear more traditional clothing, including a wrap made of printed (often brightly coloured) cloth, accompanied by a head cloth to cover the hair.

In urban areas, particularly for young people, there may be an emphasis on appearance which is linked to the soukous subculture. Young urban people may also look to African-American hip hop fashion.

Leisure

The Congolese are sociable people with a strong focus on community life. In keeping with the broader Congolese view of family and community, hospitality is valued, and people are used to opening their homes and sharing their time with relatives and friends.

The Congolese climate allows for people to spend much of the day outside, in touch with the community, and Congolese people enjoy congregating for social events. The Congolese may see their house as a place to return to at night, rather than a place to spend the day.

Music and dancing are very important in Congolese culture, and Kinshasa is seen as one of Africa's greatest centres for musical talent and innovation. The music of Kinshasa (known as soukous, a fusion of Latin, African and American jazz styles) has become broadly popular across Africa and in Europe, particularly France. Music may be used as a tool for conveying both educational and political information, and is a particularly important communication media for people with limited literacy or access to printed media. Radios are also widely used in DRC as a source of public information.

Soccer is the most popular sport, having been introduced to the country by missionaries in the early 1900s. Boxing is also popular. However, due to lack of infrastructure and resources, formal sporting activities and development are limited and rarely included in school activities.



Cultural Profiles Project (Canadian Government)

Health

Most European medical staff fled DRC following the violence that erupted after independence in 1960. The country had no African doctors and the healthcare system was one of the poorest in the world. There is still a great shortage of doctors and the quality of hospitals remains poor. Medical facilities are only available in larger population centres, and cash payment is required. Patients must often provide their own medical supplies, including bandages.


People consult with traditional healers, and may consult both a doctor and a traditional healer for the same illness. Many believe illness can arise from natural causes or be caused by witchcraft. Herbs are commonly used to treat health problems, such as palm oil for asthma or ginger for back problems.

Sexual matters are not openly discussed, and Congolese people may have limited awareness of sexually transmitted diseases, contraception and other sexual health matters. For this reason, HIV/AIDS is a concern in DRC, with an estimated adult prevalence rate of 4.2 per cent of the population in 2003 (1.1 million people living with AIDS). Female genital mutilation (FGM) is not believed to be widespread but may be practised on girls in the northern equatorial part of the country. There are no legal provisions relating to the practise, however, the law prohibits 'intentional bodily injury'.

Other common diseases in DRC include malaria, gastroenteritis, tuberculosis, African trypanosomiasis (sleeping sickness), and typhoid fever. Parasitic conditions such as schistosomiasis and tumba fly larvae are also common in some areas.

Food

Under normal conditions, the Congolese diet is very healthy. Many people farm their own food and so eat a lot of freshly grown, unprocessed foods. A typical Congolese meal consists of a starchy food (such as cassava, yams, potatoes or plantain) served with a thick stew or sauce (based on fish or meat if available). The stew is often well flavoured and spicy. Food is often prepared in large pots from which people can share the meal. In rural areas, most people use charcoal or wood for cooking, and may be unfamiliar with gas or electrical appliances. People from urban areas will be more familiar with electric cookers.



DRC has great agricultural potential, given its fertile climate and soils. However, years of conflict have resulted in decreased food security, damaged agricultural concerns and decimated livestock herds. Limited infrastructure means that it is very difficult to get food to people at risk of malnourishment, and in 2004, the World Food Organisation (WFO) estimated that 16 – 20 per cent of all DRC children under five years of age suffered from acute malnutrition.

Education

By law, primary education is free and compulsory and all Congolese have the right to education. In reality, resources for schooling are not sufficient - teachers are poorly paid and schools are without basic supplies. Pupils may be required to bring some form of payment, either money or food, in return for classes. In the early 1990s fewer than 50 per cent of school-aged children were enrolled in primary and secondary school (58 per cent of boys and 39 per cent of girls).

Primary school begins at six years of age and is taught in Kikongo, Tshiluba, Lingala or Kingwana. French is the official language of secondary and tertiary education. Boys are more likely to receive education than girls, with only five out of every 100 girls finishing their schooling. In 2003, it was estimated that approximately 65 per cent of the population was literate, that is, aged 15 or over and able to read and write in French, Lingala, Kingwana or Tshiluba (76 per cent male and 55 per cent female). Refugee education levels may be considerably lower.

Economy

While the country has vast natural resources, its economy has declined since the 1970s due to mismanagement, corruption, inflation and decreased mineral production. Most currency transactions are conducted in American dollars due to the devaluation of local currency, and most people rely on a barter economy.

Until the 1990s, mining supplied three-quarters of DRC's export earnings. However, mining industries collapsed in the 1990s due to mismanagement, civil war and the withdrawal of foreign aid. Today, the country's gross domestic product is composed of approximately 55 per cent agriculture, 34 per cent services and 11 per cent industry. Cash crops include coffee, cocoa, tea and cotton. Products gathered from the rainforest include palm oil, rubber and timber.

Most village families survive by subsistence farming, working a small plot of land. Most cannot afford farming machinery and so work with hand tools, limiting farm productivity.

Since independence, large numbers have moved to the cities hoping to find employment. However, the resulting rapid growth has led to unemployment, low wages and crowded living conditions. People without regular paid employment may find work as tailors, shoe repairers, construction workers, taxi and bus drivers, craft workers and small-scale traders. In urban centres, many women have found opportunities in retail and semi wholesale trade. However, given legal restrictions on women's economic activity, this business may be informally conducted and so female entrants may have no experience with formal banking or accounting practices.

History

The indigenous people of DRC were forest dwellers. Their descendants, primarily members of the Efe and Mbuti tribes, still live as hunters and gatherers in the northern Ituri forest.

Late in the first millennium A.D., Bantu-speaking peoples established themselves throughout Central Africa and largely displaced the indigenous peoples. By the 15th century, several kingdoms had developed in the area, including Kongo, Luba, Kuba and Lunda. During this period of time, until 1885 when the slave trade was abolished, coastal kingdoms often captured people from neighbouring areas for sale as slaves.

Over the period 1880-1910, the area was recognised as a personal territory of King Leopold II of Belgium, named the Congo Free State. The Congolese were treated as forced labour during this time and brutally treated. It is estimated that as many as 10 million Congolese died during King Leopold's reign.

News of Leopold's atrocities was made public in Belgium in 1908, and in response, the Belgian Government took control of the colony and renamed it Belgian Congo in 1910. Working conditions improved, as did infrastructure and the availability of services such as primary education and healthcare. However, extraction of natural resources continued and the Congolese had no political power.

Political

The country became independent in 1960 after decades of struggle. Its history since then has been characterised by instability in government, rebellion and secession of different provinces.

In a 1965 coup, Colonel Joseph Mobutu (also known as Mobutu Sese Soku) seized power and declared himself president. Mobutu held power from the period 1965 to 1997 through the use of military force and a series of sham elections, and the regime was characterised by institutionalised corruption, cronyism and human rights abuses. During this period the country was known as Zaire.

Following the 1994 Rwandan genocide and related violence in Burundi, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Hutus fled both countries into DRC. Hutu militias took control of the resulting refugee camps and used them as a base for buying arms and conducting cross-border raids into their own countries. In 1996, the Rwandan and Ugandan Governments, concerned at the threat from these militia groups, began to channel arms to ethnic Tutsis in the east of DRC to counteract Hutu forces. They supported a rebellion led by Laurent Kabila that saw Mobutu's reign toppled in 1997.

Upon taking power, Kabila renamed the country the Democratic Republic of Congo. In response to growing popular concern at a conspicuous foreign military presence in the country, Kabila also distanced himself from his former Rwandan and Ugandan supporters. In July 1998, Kabila ordered all Rwandan and Ugandan military forces to leave the country.

Rwandan and Ugandan concerns regarding the use of DRC as a base for Hutu militias continued. In August 1998, they backed another insurrection, this time to challenge Kabila's regime. Troops from Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Chad and Sudan intervened to support Kabila, and the country degenerated into chaos in what has been called 'Africa's World War'. Ostensibly, these foreign powers became involved in the DRC conflict to maintain regional stability. However, the country's vast natural wealth was undoubtedly a factor, with foreign militaries developing bases for resource extraction.

As a result of the 1998 war, around 1.8 million Congolese were internally displaced and around 300 000 fled to neighbouring countries. It is estimated that up to four million people have died as a result of the 1998 conflict, often through starvation and disease.

Laurent Kabila was assassinated in 2001 and succeeded as president by his son Joseph Kabila. The new president began overtures to end the war and a peace accord was signed in South Africa in 2002. A transitional government was established in 2003, with Joseph Kabila as president. An independent electoral commission has been established with the assistance of the UNDP and at the time of printing, elections were planned for 30 July 2006. Supporting the election process is the UN Mission in DR Congo (MONUC), a force of around 16 000.

It is hoped that stability in DRC will strengthen the stability of neighbouring countries and improve long-term prospects for peace in Central Africa. However, fighting continues in some areas and much of the east of the country remains unstable. It is estimated that around 1200 Congolese die every day as a result of the ongoing conflict. Human rights abuses continue, including the recruitment of child soldiers.

Sources of information

The information compiled in this report comes from a variety of sources as follows:

- emails and discussions with relevant staff working with entrants from this community
- discussions with staff in the department's national office as well as state and territory offices
- the department's Settlement Database
- the following references:

[Australian Bureau of Statistics](#)

www.abs.gov.au

[BBC News Country Profiles](#)

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