

Ituri Forest Peoples Fund

promoting the health and education
of Efe foragers and Lese farmers
in northeastern Congo



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Since May 1997 when President Kabila's army overthrew the Mobutu regime, the new government's policies have largely curbed inflation, from its peak of 24,000% in 1994. However, the east never truly demilitarized as bands of defeated FAZ (Forces Armée Zaïrois), Mai-mai (northern Kivu Hunde and Ngilima people who fought on both sides during the civil war to oust Mobutu), and interahamwe militias continued to rove the countryside 'living off the land'. As a result we have been unable to visit the Fund site since we left just before the start of the civil war in October 1996.

For the first 12 months of Kabila's rule rural economies in the Ituri have been slow to revitalize largely because the three dirt roads leading into the area are still in such poor shape that trucks can take 3-4 weeks to travel 60 miles. The road to the Fund site (Andisengi) is passable only on bicycle or on foot. Yet, during this time work began to replace the clinic supplies and educational materials stolen by Mobutu's retreating army. The clinic nurse made several trips by bicycle to a hospital over 200 miles away to buy medicines and medical supplies. And all the teachers continue to hold classes despite the loss of school books and blackboards.

However on August 2, 1998, just as security was beginning to improve, Wamba dia Wamba 'led' a rebellion against Kabila with an army composed of a strange assortment of Banyamulenge and Banyamasisi Tutsis from southern Kivu, Katangese soldiers who fled to Angola after the failure of the Simba rebellion in the 1970s, Mai-Mai militias, and Rwandan? and Ugandan? Troops. In a matter of days the 'rebels' occupied most of eastern DRC, captured Matadi and the Inga dam in western DRC, and probably would have taken Kinshasa had Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia not entered the

conflict and reinforced Kabila's ADFL (Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire) troops. At present Kabila's forces and international partners have defeated the "rebels" in the west, and with the additional assistance of interahamwe militias, hutus rebels from Burundi, and possibly 2,000 Sudanese troops, are attacking rebel held cities in the east. FAC (Forces Armée Congolais - the national army) troops are in Nia-Nia (along the road between Mambasa and Kisangani) and were reported moving toward Epulu that was still in the hands of the rebels in early September. The east is still largely rebel held but the situation is changing daily.

In the Ituri all the protestant and catholic missions have closed. Father Silvano the mission priest at Mambasa was on leave in Italy when the rebellion started in August and he has not returned. This is the first time in over 30 years that the Mambasa mission has been closed. Without Father Silvano's presence in the Ituri the IFPF has been unable to send supplies and salaries to Andisengi and, of course, we have not received any news from the site.

As far as we know, no one in Andisengi has been directly hurt as a result of the continuing conflict, but we will probably not know for sure until we are able to visit the site. Until fighting ceases in the east air travel into eastern DRC will not resume and travel overland will remain perilous. Consequently though the clinic and school may continue to function support by the IFPF is effectively on hold until fighting stops and we are able to travel to the region.