

Sustained American Attention to the Great Lakes Region of Africa

Remarks (as prepared) by U.S. Special Envoy Russ Feingold

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U.S. Institute of Peace

Thank you all for being here, and thanks to the United States Institute of Peace for hosting this and other useful events during my tenure as Special Envoy. Thank you, Nancy for that kind introduction and congratulations on your well-deserved appointment as President of USIP. Ambassador Johnnie Carson is here and, Johnnie, I want to take this chance to thank you as I have in the past, but I never get tired of doing it, for your consistently good advice and generous support. Having the benefit of your expertise in Africa has always helped me, and your wise and thoughtful approach has always helped the United States. It is truly a pleasure to work with you.

INTRODUCTION

When, in spring of 2013, President Obama and Secretary Kerry asked me to take on the role of Special Envoy to the Great Lakes Region of Africa and the DRC, I was intrigued. I felt that the United States could do more actively to support and complement regional and international efforts already underway to stabilize the region. President Obama's and Secretary Kerry's appointment of a full-time special envoy is a testament to their commitment to ensuring high-level American attention to this region. I thank them for this opportunity to further U.S. engagement in and partnership with Africa: a challenge I have embraced and enjoyed. I will always cherish having had this experience.

In our efforts, I believe we have successfully broadened U.S. engagement with the African Great Lakes region; better connecting it with U.S. international policy priorities in the process. Fortunately, most of our goals for, and priorities in, this region are shared in most respects by most of the international community and the broader Great Lakes region. There are, however, some priorities that are especially crucial to America's overall foreign policy objectives that should be part and parcel of our analysis of and action in the region. In my view, the Great Lakes region directly impacts our own national security, environmental, and economic challenges going into the heart of the 21st century.

Indeed, these very real linkages between the Great Lakes region and our broader national priorities justify, if not demand, the noticeable increase in our focus on the region in recent years. I view these linkages as both troublingly easy and crucial to make. In this regard, we have worked to align the focus among "Africa Watchers," including those within the U.S. Government, in international capitals, and also with outside experts, to avoid seeing the situation in the Great Lakes region as one of moral and humanitarian obligation alone. Our national interests, including our commitment to democracy political freedoms, and national security, and our international leadership position must be part of our approach to the African Great Lakes as well. Happily, these combined interests, including the moral and humanitarian, are more than sufficient to justify even more American attention to the region in the future.

I have made 15 trips to the region in the past year and a half, meeting repeatedly with heads of state, civil society, and our donor partners to bring sustained attention and a comprehensive approach to resolving the ongoing crisis in the Great Lakes. The signing of the February 2013 Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework Agreement, or PSCF, proved to be a touchstone in stepped-up U.S. and international engagement in the region. Our goal has been to help support the peace process launched by the signing of the Framework Agreement, including the implementation of the region's specific commitments in the Agreement not to support armed groups and to respect each other's territorial integrity.

But, as President Obama said in July 2013 during his trip to Tanzania, the Framework Agreement "can't just be a piece of paper; there has to be follow-through." Our office at the State Department, known as "SEGL" has worked hard to make sure there has been and will continue to be follow-through and support from the United States as the region furthers the implementation and spirit of the PSCF.

Through the Framework peace process, which has included annual heads of state meetings, the countries of the region have seized the opportunity to examine and address the root causes of chronic instability and underdevelopment, including such complex issues as refugees, citizenship, land reform, ethnic discrimination, and border security, impunity for human rights abuses, as well as democracy and governance issues. I came into this work feeling strongly, and still do today, that Great Lakes nations must also address popular demands for democratic and governance reforms if they are to achieve sustainable stability, prosperity, and the broader goals identified in the PSCF.

Of course, efforts to address the root causes of conflict in the Great Lakes region must be led by Africans, but with the sustained support and attention of the international community. It is no surprise to me that, two years later, many, many of the root causes identified in the PSCF and related processes remain unresolved. But, in the midst of many worrying signs and incidents, there has been some improvement on some very complex, long-standing problems that have plagued the Great Lakes countries, and there is good reason to be optimistic about the long-term trajectory of the region.

We continue to see progress in addressing the threat from the array of armed groups that have been a leading destabilizer in the DRC and the region and that inspired the signing of the PSCF. We are also seeing increased interest and commitment to regional economic integration, exemplified by the UN's organization of a regional international investment conference later this year. The region's attitude toward the United States has improved in recognition of our consistent high-level engagement and principled approach to recent challenges.

There are many issues on which I focused as Special Envoy that I unfortunately will not have time to address in depth today. Among those is the deeply upsetting and ongoing crisis of violence against women as a weapon of war and the commendable efforts being spent to empower and improve the lives of women and youth in the region. We have also pursued solutions to issues surrounding the need for continued security sector reform, countering wildlife poaching and promotion of wildlife protection, and increasing the legitimate trade in natural resources from the Great Lakes region. I was pleased to play a supportive role in trying to resolve the difficult situation surrounding adoptions in the DRC that has affected hundreds of American families. They have found their dreams of adopting a child who was born in the DRC indefinitely delayed, as the DRC government has sought reforms to its adoption policies. These are only some of the other issues we worked on that deserve more discussion and attention than we have time for today. This morning, however, I want to discuss some of our specific SEGL efforts in three parts.

First, the initial task that confronted me when I first joined the State Department of dealing with the ongoing rebellion from the M23 rebel group in eastern DRC, second, "SEGL" efforts aimed at addressing the longstanding root causes of the conflict and, third, some unique initiatives our SEGL office has begun, and, I hope, will continue after I leave this position.

I. The Initial Task of Dealing with the M23 Threat

When Secretary Kerry first contacted me about this position in February 2013, he mentioned the problem of the armed group known as the M23. He was clear, should I take this job, that helping the region end the armed rebellion and the threat posed by this armed group would be my first, if not my primary, priority.

Over the course of my first six months as SEGL, three developments contributed to the military defeat of the M23. First, the DRC government put in place more operationally effective and accountable military officers in the embattled region of North Kivu. In addition, in March 2013, the UN Security Council approved the establishment within the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC, or MONUSCO, of the first regionally-led, 3,000-troop-strong Intervention Brigade, or IB, composed of troops from Tanzania, Malawi, and South Africa. With the establishment of the IB, the Security Council also expanded MONUSCO's mandate to include the explicit task of neutralizing the threat of armed groups. We strongly supported these measures in an effort to increase MONUSCO's capability to protect civilians by more robustly targeting armed groups. MONUSCO, with its IB, provided critical support to the FARDC in the final months of the M23 rebellion, helping to finally turn the tide against the rebel group after more than 15 months of fighting. Finally, and I believe most importantly, outside support to the M23 significantly decreased toward the end of the rebellion. This was in large part the result of American-led, sustained, high-level diplomatic and financial pressure on Rwanda to cease support for the M23.

A second development was the political resolution of the M23 rebellion, which came via the Kampala Dialogue, successfully facilitated by Uganda in its role as chair of the regional organization the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, or the ICGLR. While the Kampala Dialogue started in December 2012, it lagged for months. This was in part because of the lack of sufficient military pressure on and continued external support to the M23. However, the Dialogue gained traction when the M23 was forced to drop its more unrealistic demands in the face of increased military pressure from the FARDC and MONUSCO in late summer 2013. The Ugandan government's continued engagement throughout this period also is commendable; had they given up when talks lagged, we might have seen a very different outcome.

Third, I also believe the eventual success of the Kampala Dialogue was significantly aided by the added participation of five international envoys -- UN Special Envoy, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Special Representative for the African Union, Senior Coordinator for the European Union, and me. Prior to September 2013, the international community had not participated in the Kampala Dialogue, or even been allowed in the room during the substantive negotiations. This changed, when during the envoys' first joint-trip to the region, we made the decision to travel to Kampala and meet with the DRC and the M23 delegations in an effort to overcome the stalemate in the talks and pressure the parties toward an internationally acceptable outcome.

The Nairobi Declarations of December 2013 were the outgrowth of five critical negotiation sessions over the span of three months. The Kampala Dialogue had been initiated under the auspices of the ICGLR then under the leadership of Uganda, its president, and the Ugandan defense minister, who most often served as facilitator of the talks. As of late August 2013, the talks had grown largely moribund as the parties focused their energies on a new and stepped-up round of hostilities. It was at this point that this group of five international envoys chose to meet in Kampala to press the participants of the Dialogue to either conclude with an agreement or with the recognition that an alternative approach would have to be sought.

My staff and I were deeply involved in all five of the final negotiation sessions that culminated with the Nairobi Declarations. All of the envoys were involved in the first session in September 2013. I personally led or co-led with the excellent UN SRSG Martin Kobler three of the subsequent sessions and, in one very protracted session, my Senior Adviser, Brennan Gilmore, took the lead role along with Kobler. One of our top priorities during these sessions was to ensure that whatever agreement came out of the talks, it would break away from the litany of failed agreements in the past that had granted amnesty for all crimes and sought to end the threat of rebel groups by incorporating them wholesale into the DRC military. That recipe has repeatedly failed to bring any lasting stability to the region and served only to sow the seeds for future rebellions. We were steadfast in our position that peace in the DRC demands justice and the end of impunity for war crimes, crimes against humanity including sexual and gender-

based violence, and the recruitment and use of child soldiers. The 12 –month long Kampala Dialogue was successfully concluded in December 2013 when the DRC government and the M23 signed their respective portions of what became known as the “Nairobi Declarations.” Most important, the Nairobi Declarations included provisions for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of the M23, accountability for those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity, and excluded the possibility of incorporating all of the M23 into the DRC military.

Following the signing of the Nairobi Declarations, all parties were to begin implementation of the contents of their declarations, starting immediately with DDR for the ex-M23 combatants then in the DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda, and to refocus the region on the broader implementation of the Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework.

The DRC government started strong, fulfilling one of its primary commitments by promulgating an amnesty law, which granted amnesty only for the act of insurrection on a case-by-case basis to those individuals who renounced rebellion. The law crucially did not grant amnesty for war crimes, crimes against humanity, sexual violence, the recruitment of child soldiers, or other human rights abuses.

After this strong start, the implementation of the Nairobi Declarations languished for a year while ex-M23 combatants remained mostly in camps in Uganda and Rwanda. The team of envoys, and the international community more broadly, supported efforts to accelerate the DDR process, but increasingly the DRC government chose to handle the issue bilaterally between themselves and their Ugandan and Rwandan counterparts. This resulted in an agreement with Uganda to repatriate some 120 ex-M23 in December last year. Unfortunately many more remain who have not begun the DDR process, including some who have left the camps in Uganda and Rwanda and likely have filtered back into the DRC outside the formal DDR process. I have supported, and continue to support, efforts to bring both the DRC government and the ex-M23 to an agreement for holistic repatriation and reintegration of former M23 fighters into Congolese society. I am hopeful this will occur in the not too distant future and believe it is imperative in preventing future rebellions and building lasting stability in eastern DRC.

II. SEGL Initiatives Addressing the Longstanding Root Causes of the Great Lakes Conflict

Now, some might think that the end of the M23 rebellion would have been a logical place for the Great Lakes Special Envoy role to conclude. Yet the end of the M23 rebellion did not resolve any of the so-called root causes of the decades-old conflict. It was, by all accounts, a major step in the right direction for a troubled region. But I was not ready to conclude this work, and the Secretary was not either and so he asked me to keep going. Secretary Kerry has been a great support in this work and has shown a strong vision for, and commitment to, the region. We both felt that the combination of positive momentum from the end of the M23 rebellion, and the high-level focus on the Great Lakes Region by the international community had set up a unique opportunity for more progress towards lasting peace in the Great Lakes Region.

There have been several instances where SEGL and American-led initiatives relating to the root causes of the conflict took U.S. engagement in the region to a new level.

A. Initiation and Development of Ongoing Envoy Team Coordination and Coordination with ICG and P3, as well as interaction with the UN and AU

First, I'd say that one of the most important developments during my tenure has been the sustained high-level attention paid to the region by the international community. Too often, the international community – including the United States - has zeroed in on the Great Lakes during times of extreme crisis, only to vacate the region after the slightest sign of progress. What anyone working on the Great Lakes knows is that progress is being made, but it is slow and often intermittent. It took decades for the conflict in

eastern DRC to become as entrenched as it is. It will inevitably take years to achieve a stability that is durable and that can be the foundation for long-term development. The slow pace of progress in no way undermines the value of the work done in the region by the host governments and by donors; rather, it highlights the importance of sustained high-level attention by the international community and the complex nature of the sources of conflict in the region.

There are many crises in the world that could easily demand all of our attention in their own right. But, the only way to achieve durable progress is to stay committed to a region not only until the crisis of the moment is overcome, but until the people in the region have the stability, resources, and government support they need to realize their own and their country's full potential.

Part of this sustained attention is effective coordination between donors and other interested stakeholders. One of the unexpected highlights of my tenure as Special Envoy has been the exceptional coordination between the international envoys. I remember in June of 2013, my first phone call with then UN Special Envoy Mary Robinson and our initial discussion of possibly doing a joint trip to the region at some point. That first coordinated trip came early in my tenure in September 2013 and quickly set a precedent for joint action by the group of international envoys, creating what came to be known as the "E-team." I've already described the E-Team role in the Kampala Talks, but our work together went far beyond that. Since that first trip, the envoys have communicated with each other nearly every day, if not multiple times a day. This ensures that we are on the same page, have the same and most up to date information, and are able to coordinate on messaging, priorities, and travel. I believe that the E-Team's commitment to coordination increases the impact of each envoy and their respective country or organization. It also demonstrates a greater collective resolve to the region than has been seen in recent years.

I also want to say the same can be said for our coordination with the UK, France, and many of our other donor partners, as well with the International Great Lakes Contact Group. With an active UN Envoy as part of the ongoing discussions with other international envoys, our coordination has set a platform for consistency in messages at the UN, and from the UN Security Council to the region.

B. Insisting on the Elimination of FDLR

As a second point, I'd like to talk about the need to eliminate the FDLR. In order for the DRC, and the region more broadly, to fully realize its development potential, the end of all illegal armed groups in the region is an absolute requirement. I have already discussed this morning the end of the M23 rebellion, and there have been some positive steps taken with regard to the Allied Democratic Forces armed group, or ADF. Continued efforts must be made to end all illegal armed groups like the ADF and the groups known as Mai Mai and others, who commit gross human rights abuses that contribute to a lawless environment and continued displacement of local populations, and who prevent the investment necessary to develop the country. The openings left by conflict are the cracks in a society that represent an invitation or an opening for extremism to come in and wreak further havoc. It is in the security interests of the United States to prevent these armed groups from continuing to destabilize the Great Lakes Region and to remove the threat posed by ungoverned spaces by returning state authority throughout the DRC.

Accordingly, one of our top priorities has been to end the threat of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, or FDLR – a group whose members include some of those responsible for the 1994 Rwandan genocide, and a group that has been destabilizing the region and preying upon the people of eastern DRC and Rwanda since its inception close to 15 years ago.

Beginning in January 2014 and throughout the last year, I have made the elimination of the FDLR a personal priority in my work. We have clearly been the strongest and most consistent voices in favor of solving this problem.

There have been multiple efforts to end the threat of the FDLR and these efforts have succeeded in reducing the group to a fraction of its original size. The FDLR is estimated to be about 1400 strong. The group, however, remains a threat to civilians in eastern DRC, and its continuation is a roadblock to increased trust and cooperation between the DRC and Rwanda. Now I'd like to share something I will always remember. I was told back in May that the FDLR are "comfortable" in eastern DRC. This is unacceptable. No armed group, especially one with a list of committed atrocities as long as that of the FDLR, should be comfortable. I share the frustrations of many, including Rwanda, about how long the FDLR has been allowed to sit comfortably in the DRC, and even travel within the region, while other armed groups are targeted and militarily forced to demobilize.

Ending the threat of the FDLR is not just a DRC responsibility, or even a regional responsibility, it is an international responsibility. We all have a deep interest in ensuring accountability for those responsible for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and acts of genocide. It is therefore an obligation for the DRC government, the region, all African countries, the UN Security Council, and donors – to do everything we can to end the threat of this group and bring its leaders to justice, including ensuring that Sylvestre Mudacumura has his day at the International Criminal Court.

We often hear claims from FDLR leaders that they represent the interests of refugees, or those who would seek political change in Rwanda. Let me be clear: the FDLR, with its shameful history of horrific violence against the people of Rwanda and the DRC, has absolutely no legitimate claim to participate in a political process or to represent the interests of civilians in the region. In fact, the FDLR's continued existence presents a substantial roadblock to addressing the concerns of legitimate actors pursuing peace and democracy in the region.

For more than a year now, the FDLR has repeatedly promised to demobilize. But, after a year of largely unjustified waiting, and a specific six-month grace period granted to the FDLR by the ICGLR and SADC for the voluntary demobilization of the group, fewer than 400 actually surrendered in 2014. That is roughly 25% of the group's estimated 1,400 combatants and doesn't account for the recruitment that the FDLR conducted throughout last year, nor does it include any of the military leadership, who remain in the bush. The FDLR has proven that a purely voluntary surrender process will not bring about the end of this group.

The United States has consistently supported and advocated for a two-pronged approach to dismantling the FDLR. This includes an ongoing and robust DDR program for any FDLR combatant who surrenders, but is coupled with military action by the DRC military and MONUSCO against those who refuse to surrender. The region tried a purely voluntary process. It did not work. Full stop.

The troop contributing countries, or TCCs, of the IB understand their responsibilities and that the expectations for the IB correspond to MONUSCO's mandate to neutralize all armed groups, including the FDLR. They have publicly reiterated their commitment to civilian protection, and ending the threat of the FDLR is a critical and necessary part of that. They also understand that the IB's potential unwillingness to go after the FDLR as aggressively as they went after the M23 could weaken support for this structure, which would not be in the interest of the DRC or the region. It would also call into question the TCCs' own commitment to ending the threat of armed groups.

I want to be clear. The United States fully supports the ongoing DDR/RR process of any and all ex-FDLR members who lay down their weapons. Over the years, thousands of ex-FDLR combatants have safely and successfully returned to Rwanda. I visited the demobilization camp for former FDLR combatants in Mutobo, and was impressed with the program Rwanda runs there to support the return of ex-FDLR. Rwanda has repeatedly shown its willingness and readiness to receive ex-FDLR members at any time. Even after military operations are launched, the DDR process remains open to FDLR combatants who lay down their weapons, which we strongly encourage them to do.

The moment is now for ending the threat of the FDLR, and the onus is on the DRC government to deliver on its commitment to do so. The government announced the start of operations on January 29, but as of yet, operations have yet to be launched. The only entity that benefits from further delays in military operations is the FDLR. The DRC government owes it to its people to do everything it can to immediately and permanently end the threat of the FDLR.

C. Accountability and Mixed Chambers

In a country as haunted by former and present conflict as the DRC, achieving stability requires more than just ending conflict. It requires justice and accountability. It is not enough to silence the guns and disarm rebels. There needs to be real accountability for human rights abuses in order for the population not only to return to their communities, but for the people to heal and move on with their lives.

Now, accountability is also necessary to create a strong deterrent against future rebellions and armed groups. This is why we fought so hard to ensure that the Nairobi Declarations included language on accountability and denied complete amnesty. If the leaders of these rebel groups are never prosecuted for their crimes, what deterrent is there for them not to return to the bush? And what assurance is there for the general population that another rebellion is not right around the corner?

But, accountability is not easy, especially in a country where the judicial sector is under-resourced and under-developed. The ICC has made it clear that they cannot handle all the cases being sent to them and countries must be ready and willing to seek accountability on their own. Throughout my tenure, in strong partnership with Ambassador Stephen Rapp, I have advocated strongly for the creation of mixed chambers in the DRC, which would create additional courts within the DRC judicial system with both Congolese and international staff, including judges, prosecutors, and support staff. Mixed chambers would increase the capacity of the existing judicial sector and bring in much needed expertise from international jurists. The end goal for the DRC is comprehensive judicial reform that establishes a credible and self-sustaining judicial system. But this is a long way off, and it is neither fair nor practical to wait that long to hold perpetrators accountable for crimes being committed now or in recent years. Mixed chambers would provide a solution in the short-term and foster judicial reform in the process.

We had hoped that the DRC government would pass legislation establishing mixed chambers during last fall's Parliamentary session. We understand now that there is new draft legislation working its way through the executive branch, which has yet to be presented to Parliament. We strongly encourage the DRC government to move ahead with the draft legislation and for Parliament to pass it during its upcoming March session. The United States stands ready to support the establishment of these courts when the appropriate legislation is passed.

D. Refugees

Let me turn now to the issue of refugees in the Great Lakes Region. Along with their focus on ending the threat of the FDLR, the envoys have also been attentive to the need to address the fate of residual refugee populations in the DRC and the surrounding countries. Much of this attention has been focused on the population of Rwandan refugees who remain in the DRC, and who in many cases are tied up with the issue of the FDLR.

A key point to reiterate: The FDLR does not represent the interests of Rwandan refugees.

Despite an attempt in 2005 to create a political party separate from the armed elements, and despite including elements of traditional leadership of some of the refugees, the FDLR has never been a legitimate representative of refugees. Many of the Rwandan refugees are judged in fact to be held hostage by the FDLR and many refugees are certainly FDLR family members (including those who have grown up or been born in the DRC during the nearly 21 years since the Rwandan genocide).

UNHCR has convened semi-regular tripartite commission meetings with the DRC and Rwandan governments. These meetings address the question of Rwandan refugees in the DRC, as well as that of Congolese Tutsi refugees in Rwanda.

We also must consider this largely Hutu refugee population in the context of other refugees/IDPs in the region, and recognize the sensitivity of the issues relating to Congolese Tutsi refugees in Rwanda. However, we cannot conflate the two issues or unintentionally create a “prisoner swap” narrative. While the Tripartite Process has acknowledged that conditions are ripe for the return of Rwandan refugees, UNHCR has stated that conditions in eastern DRC do not permit the organized return of Congolese refugees in Rwanda.

In October of last year, I led a mission to Geneva with my fellow envoys to discuss these issues at length with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Following these meetings, I was pleased to see UNHCR developed plans to begin a new biometric registration of the Rwandan refugee population. UNHCR expects to start the biometric registration of the Rwandan refugee population in the DRC soon as a first step towards accelerating durable solutions for this caseload. The United States has contributed \$1 million above our usual contribution to UNHCR to allow the registration process to begin in the highest priority areas in the Kivus. The registration exercise is an essential step in demonstrating that the international community is focused on the Rwandan refugee population in the DRC and on accelerating repatriation.

E. Elections and Political Freedom in the Region

I’d like to turn now to a topic that I view as critical and necessary for peace and development to take root in the Great Lakes region and that is the topic of elections, and the related issue of political freedom. Timely, credible elections are the cornerstones of democracy, and are the key to unlocking the vast potential of this region.

Over the next three years, several countries in the region are scheduled to hold national elections. Much attention, however, is focused on the future of four countries in the Great Lakes region, Burundi, Republic of Congo, DRC, and Rwanda. These four countries have the opportunity to establish their place among the community of nations who defend democratic ideals and promote the free, fair, and transparent election of its leaders. On the other hand, the spillover effect of bad elections, or the postponement of national elections in these countries could have regional repercussions, as well as severe consequences for the individual countries themselves. These countries, and their leadership, can signal to their citizens, the region, and the world their commitment to the future of their countries and the value they place on the electoral process by adhering to their constitutions – including constitutional provisions regarding term limits.

The peaceful transition of power is not a luxury a society should crave, but rather is a basic right. It is a principle the United States promotes in all countries across the region, and, indeed, the world. Changing constitutions and eliminating term-limits to favor current incumbents is inconsistent with democratic principles, reduces confidence in democratic institutions, often leading to serious instability, and undermines the legacy and legitimacy of any individual who demands such steps.

I have spoken out about my concerns regarding deviation from the path to peaceful transition of power throughout my tenure as Special Envoy. The promotion of democracy supports universal human rights by empowering civil society and advancing the right to speak freely, peacefully assemble and associate, and by supporting the ability of people to determine their future. A peaceful opposition and civil society are key stakeholders in the electoral process, and they must be permitted to express themselves without fear of reprisals. Security force abuses against those who peacefully seek to promote the democratic process earn our condemnation and damage bi-lateral relationships.

These national elections are scheduled for 2015 in Burundi, 2016 in the Republic of Congo and DRC, and 2017 in Rwanda. The presidents of these countries have the opportunity to safeguard their legacies as the leaders with the vision to ensure their countries are firmly on the path to democratization and to a future that is not scripted by the few. In the United States and Africa, former presidents continue to serve important roles as experienced leaders on the national and international stage. We are particularly encouraged by ongoing efforts to pass legislation regarding the future roles of past presidents in the DRC.

1. Upcoming DRC Elections

In mid-January, people in the DRC took to the streets when it became known that the Parliament was considering mandating the holding of a census prior to elections, a step that would surely have delayed the electoral process by at least a year if not more. In the span of a week, we saw the very real potential for crisis in the DRC over elections, as well as the strength of the DRC democracy when its elected officials listen to the people and serve in the best interest of the country. The DRC Senate and National Assembly jointly deliberated over electoral legislation and reached consensus, about removing the requirement for a census. The legislation was recently signed by the President and promulgated. When I spoke to the National Assembly President and the Foreign Minister afterwards, I expressed my belief that that decision by Parliament will go down in DRC democratic and constitutional history, particularly if the electoral cycle moves forward from here in a timely, organized and transparent manner.

Less than two weeks ago, the DRC's National Independent Electoral Commission, or CENI, finally released a comprehensive electoral calendar setting out a detailed timeline for conducting local, provincial, senatorial, gubernatorial, legislative and presidential elections. Most important, the calendar officially schedules presidential and national legislative elections on November 27, 2016, thereby reflecting the constitutional mandate to hold presidential elections before President Kabila's current term ends in December 2016. The release of this comprehensive calendar is a welcome and important step in the electoral cycle. The announcement of the presidential elections with the timeline is particularly important in assuring what Congolese people expect will be the first peaceful transition of presidential power in their country's history since independence.

The calendar's tight timeframes and the lack of established DRC government budgetary support, however, raise questions about the feasibility of achieving its goals, particularly given the massive budget for the entire electoral cycle and the lack of funds provided to the electoral commission to date. The United States and the international community will need to continue to work closely with the CENI and the Congolese government to assure the successful conduct of these elections, including ensuring that the electoral cycle is kept on track and avoids electoral sliding. The United States was the first country to commit funds to this electoral cycle when Secretary Kerry announced \$20 million in electoral support during his visit to Kinshasa last May. With an estimated cost of over \$1 billion, the DRC government will need to work diligently to come up with the necessary funding. We expect that other donors will be ready to also support the process, when given the assurances they need that the electoral cycle, - and most notably the presidential elections - will be kept on track.. It is also essential that all eligible Congolese be given a voice in determining the country's future at this important moment in the DRC's history and so we are watching as decisions are made about voter registration.

2. Burundi

In late May of 2014, at my suggestion, the team of international envoys made a special trip to Burundi to discuss political freedom and upcoming elections.

Burundi is often overlooked in a region that tends to be dominated by eastern Congo and regional tensions. Burundi demonstrates both the progress and the concerns that we see across the region. The country has made tremendous progress in recent years, coming out of civil war, establishing a constitution and a government, and holding its first elections since the end of the war. The prognosis for the country could be bright, but a caveat to that is how the country will handle its next elections, scheduled for this summer.

Burundi has proven its ability to hold an election and for Parliamentary seats to change hands, but it has yet to demonstrate a peaceful transition of executive power.

Unlike the DRC and other countries on the continent, the Burundian constitution could be read to allow President Nkurunziza to hold a third term. The United States does not refute that there is a legal argument for a third term. Instead, as a friend and ally of Burundi, the United States is urging the Burundian government to ensure that the upcoming elections are consistent with the Arusha Accords, which state unambiguously that no president shall serve more than two terms. It is our belief that upholding Arusha, including its provision on term limits, is key to maintaining a still fragile stability in Burundi in the near-term. So, we are not making a legal argument here. President Nkurunziza has overseen Burundi's incredible progress over the past ten years and his legacy will reflect that progress. His legacy will not be the same, however, if he runs again and violates Arusha.

Furthermore, the test for Burundi is not merely in the outcome of the elections, but also in the electoral process. The credibility of an election depends not just on election day, but on the whole electoral process. With this in the mind, we are paying close attention to the treatment of opposition members in Burundi and any attempt to undermine the rights of Burundian citizens. We were encouraged by the recent release on bail of Burundian journalist Bob Rugurika, but remain alarmed by the questionable charges levied against him and other journalists reporting on the electoral process and other recent events in Burundi. To ensure free, fair, and credible elections, all political actors, civil society, and the media need to be able to participate fully without threats or intimidation.

The United States looks forward to further partnership with Burundi and will remain active observers of the upcoming electoral process.

3. Rwanda

We look forward to supporting Rwanda's upcoming electoral process. We hope to see improvements to better enable political parties to register and participate in elections and to ensure that people and the press can freely converse about the electoral process. Rwanda is an example to be followed when it comes to women's rights, the rights of the disabled, and the promotion of economic opportunities. The country's world standing would be further strengthened by efforts to similarly lead on the protection of political freedoms and promotion of democracy, including President Kagame's respect for term limits.

4. Political Rights in Great Lakes Region

As the region works to overcome its history of conflict, including ending the M23 rebellion and the ongoing effort to thwart the FDLR, there needs to be just as much effort put into ensuring free speech, freedom of assembly, due process, and voting rights.

While investors and donors certainly care about economic indicators and growth, they also care about the civic stability of a country. This is true of the U.S. Congress as well. A country with economic credentials, but that infringes upon its people's civil rights, can cause the same level of concern to investors and donors as countries experiencing conflict. The concern comes from doubts about long-term stability.

These issues are coming to the forefront as many countries in the region gear up for elections. The rights to free speech and freedom of assembly are important every day of the week, but especially, especially important in the run up to elections when voters are most likely and most driven to speak out. Public commentary spikes during an election year. An outspoken populace is not a sign of instability, quite the opposite. When people can peacefully and openly speak their minds, a country demonstrates its true strength, its values, and its national pride.

I conveyed this message on more than one occasion in my meetings with each of the Presidents in the region. The DRC has a lively civil society and should be commended for it. But we are deeply troubled by recent increases in arrests of opposition members, of people who have spoken out against revising the Congolese constitution, and of journalists, including crackdowns by the security services during the public protests in January, which resulted in the deaths of more than 40 people. Similarly, we are concerned by the decline of political freedoms in Rwanda and reports of extra-judicial killings. Rwanda has an incredible story to tell about development and overcoming tragedy, but that story is undermined if there is not equal progress on, and promotion of, political freedoms and democracy. As I said with regard to Burundi, elections are more than the day votes are cast, they are about a process and that process must be free, fair, and transparent.

As the region works to address the root causes of conflict, we encourage them similarly to address the building blocks of stability, and those include ensuring the protection of human rights and civil liberties.

III. New SEGL Initiatives

A. A Broader Political Dialogue for the Great Lakes Region and the US/Angola Bilateral Relationship

Finally, I want to mention three original initiatives that we were able to launch during our tenure. I hope these have injected some new energy and ideas into the efforts to meet the challenges and embrace the potential of the Great Lakes Region.

First, one of the truly positive stories during my tenure has been watching, and encouraging, the emergent role of Angola as a leader in the region and on the continent. Following Uganda's successful chairmanship of the ICGLR, highlighted by its shepherding of the Kampala Dialogue, Angola assumed the head of the regional organization in January 2014.

Angola's leadership has in fact proven to be outstanding. Shortly after assuming the chair of the ICGLR, Angolan President Dos Santos led a series of meetings of regional Heads of State to discuss how to end the threat of remaining armed groups in the DRC.

These sessions reflected what I had been advocating for many months: the need for a broader high-level, African-led dialogue to address core causes of instability in the region, and to look for positive opportunities for economic development and regional collaboration.

It is not just the United States that has commended Angola. Indeed regional leaders speak highly of President Dos Santos and Foreign Minister Chikoti's leadership and objectivity, and all have expressed willingness to expand their dialogue to include broader security issues, regional economic integration, and confidence-building measures.

Angola has spearheaded a clear, consistent and fair approach to ending the FDLR scourge, recognizing the roadblock that the continued existence of this group presents to addressing broader issues and moving the region forward.

I have had the pleasure of traveling to Angola four times to encourage this Angola initiative, including with Secretary Kerry in May of last year. Our increased engagement with Angola helped strengthen the first holding of the U.S.-Angola Strategic Dialogue in Washington, last December. We also welcomed Angola's election to the UN Security Council and look forward to strong cooperation with them during their two-year membership. I have complete confidence that U.S.-Angola relations will continue to expand as we work together to address security concerns and embrace economic opportunities across the continent and across the globe.

B. The U.S. and China in the Great Lakes Region and in Africa in General

A second initiative relates to China's role in Africa. One thing many Americans seem to be aware of with regard to Africa is that the Chinese are very active on the continent and have been for some time. Yet it surprised me to find that very little was known about their activities in the Great Lakes Region and how we could better coordinate with the Chinese on matters of common concern.

Part of my approach as Special Envoy has involved outreach to non-traditional partners of the U.S. in the region to identify areas of mutual interest and potential cooperation. In so-called "like-minded groups" with traditional, mostly Western countries, we already work to harmonize strategy and messaging, and share information. These groups, including the International Great Lakes Contact Group, play a critical role. However, these groups do not always include some major players in the region and the continent, and I have strived to reach out and include these non-traditional countries. I supported including South Africa, Germany, and Sweden as members to the Contact Group as a means to widen the interests and experience represented in these discussions.

There is no denying the role and impact of China in Africa, including in the Great Lakes region, and early on, and with Secretary Kerry's strong encouragement, I started meeting with representatives of the PRC in countries I was visiting, on the continent, but also in Europe, New York and in Washington. In these meetings, we discussed similarities, as well as differences, in our diplomatic approach to the region. And each time, I was left with the impression that there was significant room for common understanding and even collaboration on key issues to both our countries. Also, each time I was encouraged to continue these conversations in Beijing.

This outreach thus culminated in a very productive visit to Beijing in November 2014, where I met with government representatives, academics, and think-tanks to explore areas for greater cooperation on peace and security issues in the Great Lakes.

In Beijing, I proposed inviting China, for the first time, to participate in the Contact Group, and I am glad to report that Ambassador Zhong, China's Special Envoy for Africa participated in the last meeting of the Contact Group in January which was held in Berlin.

As a major partner of Africa, China's voice is to be welcomed on messaging on peace and security issues in the Great Lakes, particularly on the need to eliminate threats to regional security, such as that posed by the FDLR. Like China, the United States believes that Africa and the region must be in the lead in efforts to address peace and security challenges, with the international community playing a supporting role.

C. Positive Opportunities in the Great Lakes Region: The Great Lakes to Great Lakes Initiative

Finally, since taking up this position, I have wondered why there is not more discussion about the lakes themselves. In fact, when it was first announced I would be taking this job, it wasn't strange for people to assume, that as a Wisconsin native, I'd be measuring lake levels in Lake Michigan. But coming from the Great Lakes region of the U.S., questions about the African Great Lakes naturally occurred to me. Like, how can the potential of the African Great Lakes be maximized as a source of healthy food and livelihoods?

An idea for an information exchange between scientists, academics, and policymakers from the North American Great Lakes with their counterparts from the African Great Lakes began to take shape through discussions with the EPA, members of the U.S. Water Partnership such as the Nature Conservancy, and relevant offices in the State Department. In fact, a good friend of mine, Susan Hedman, the Great Lakes National Program Manager for the EPA and Wisconsin native, was the first to suggest to me the idea for an information exchange.

We wanted to offer a vehicle for stakeholders in the African Great Lakes region to benefit from some of the lessons learned by their North American counterparts regarding sustainable management of transboundary lakes. Together, the North American and African Great Lakes systems hold nearly half of the world's surface freshwater resources. This was a surprising statistic to me and drove home the need for careful stewardship of these waters. The countries bordering both Great Lakes systems grapple with similar problems: toxic contaminants and contaminated sediments, nutrient loading and runoff, the introduction and impact of exotic non-native species, and climate change.

In the beginning of February, my office hosted a kick-off meeting of what we are calling the Great Lakes to Great Lakes Initiative. Over three days on the shore of Lake Tanganyika in Kigoma, Tanzania, experts from the United States and Canada engaged in an in-depth exchange with colleagues from countries around one of the African Great Lakes. The meeting attracted 48 participants from a range of disciplines to discuss the connected nature of agriculture, fisheries, water and sanitation, and eco-tourism activities with the goal of expediting environmental – and economic – improvements in the countries surrounding the African Great Lakes.

Participants expressed great enthusiasm for continuing the exchange of information and ideas beyond the meeting in Kigoma. They identified priority areas for further collaboration including how to extend future exchanges to other African Great Lakes. The Executive Director of the Lake Tanganyika Authority, with whom my office worked closely to organize this event, summarized the view of many in his closing remarks at the Kigoma meeting. He said, "Discussions with experts from the North American Great Lakes allowed us to understand that many of the problems we are facing are shared by our colleagues. This initiative has given new hope for a sustainable partnership to find new solutions."

Such gains are the type of peace dividend envisioned by signers of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework Agreement.

CONCLUSION

And now, for some Thank You's.

First, I'd like to thank the Africa bureau's Assistant Secretary Linda Thomas-Greenfield for her kindness and for her welcoming attitude towards me. She is a true pleasure to work with and the United States is lucky to have someone of her caliber in such an important position. I was told that my working relationship with the Assistant Secretary for Africa would be a key factor in my work as an envoy and I couldn't have been more fortunate. We also benefited on a daily basis from the support of many other members in the Africa bureau under Linda's expert leadership. This includes the many Desk Officers, all of the DAS's and Directors and Deputy Directors in A-F who helped us on a daily basis.

Outside groups and advocates are one of the main reasons I have this job. Their tireless work to make a special envoy role for the Great Lakes a priority, and their support for our initiatives was a constant buoy to our efforts. I think of our friends at Enough, Human Rights Watch, Sant Egidio, Dialogue Advisory Group, the Eastern Congo Initiative and others who have steadfastly and diligently expressed their passion for the success of the Great Lakes Region to us and with us.

We were the recipient of excellent support and guidance from Ambassadors and their staffs in the region and all over the world where we visited. It's been great to see how well the United States is represented around the globe.

I also would like to express my thanks to the regional governments who were open and generous with their time and consideration of the US point of view.

Let me also mention that David Wade and Jon Finer, the Secretary's Chief of Staff and Deputy Chief, who were constant in their willingness to collaborate and were extremely responsive to our many requests for engagement from the Secretary. And the same goes to the NSC staff we worked with regularly, Anna Cave, Jon Gandomi, and of course President Obama's National Security Advisor Susan Rice, his Senior Director for African Affairs, Grant Harris, and Special Assistant to the President, Gayle Smith. My thanks also to the excellent help we received from our US –UN colleagues. My thanks especially to Ambassador Samantha Power.

And, most of all, we were so fortunate in the people we worked directly with every day in our SEGL office and through constant day and night blackberry messages. My once, current, and I hope future Chief of Staff, Mary Irvine, known to most people as "Murph," started with me on my very first day as an envoy in the State Department in July 2013, just as she was there every day for my tenure in the U.S. Senate. She has brilliantly held the SEGL operation together. And Jeremy Tollefson showed up at just the right time to help our office achieve some important goals. Murph and I couldn't have asked for a better Senior Advisor than Brennan Gilmore. He is a great friend and a true expert on Africa. Brennan was an integral part of and a leader on everything we worked on in our office, and he has been there every step of the way. Jeanne Hruska was detailed to our office from the Africa bureau by the generosity of Linda Thomas-Greenfield. Her truly tireless work is an example to everyone at the State Department and I thank her for her dedication and superb work as an expert on the Great Lakes Region and in her role as the real force behind the organized coordination of the International Contact Group. Amy Truesdell came to us from the CSO bureau and we were grateful for her detailed analysis of elections issues, and the truly fantastic job she did in organizing the Great Lakes to Great Lakes Initiative. It is an enormous contribution to our work.

My friends, I started visiting African countries in 1994, meeting the people, and beginning to understand the challenges. Today, this more than 20-year interest and devotion to Africa has become an important part of my life. I found, as have many of you, that Africa becomes part of your heart and stays inside you.

So having an opportunity to do this job concerning Africa was very compelling. And it was particularly compelling because it involved trying to achieve peace. As Pope Francis has said, "Peace is always possible, but we have to seek it." And I believe that this effort of seeking peace has to be an ongoing and sustained effort.

Peace is best realized through constructive dialogue. True dialogue inspires growth, reveals shared interests, and can motivate parties in conflict to find peaceful, equitable solutions. And where discussions are held publicly, more voices can be heard to contribute to a common goal.

There is a well-known quotation about the DRC that keeps coming back to me and for me, it relates to much of the Great Lakes region. The comment is from Congolese author, Mbepongo "Dedy" Bilamba and it reads:

"Congo is like a nightmare in heaven. It's a heaven because, you know, Congo is the heart of Africa. So much natural resources, the people, the animals, the flowers, everything. Congo is a heaven, but the thing is that people are living like in hell."

We know this is by no means the whole story. I have witnessed many successes in both the DRC and the Great Lakes Region in general. And, we understand the DRC may never be heaven on earth. What place really is? Yet while there are still many people living in the DRC and the Great Lakes region who have been through hell and have lost loved ones in hellish circumstances, and while in my travels I have certainly seen suffering that has fueled my desire to see positive change; I have also seen the vibrancy, energy, resourcefulness, and intelligence of the Congolese people and people of the Great Lakes region. This is especially striking given the circumstances they have lived through.

And, so as Americans, we do have a responsibility to do everything we can to be a good partner. We must guard against feelings of despair and seek hopefulness over a feeling of futility, just as so many of the people of the Great Lakes Region do every day in these difficult circumstances.

Let us all renew a pledge today that we will maintain our own sustained attention for Africa and for this Great Lakes Region. I can assure you of the sustained attention of our friends here at USIP and in the State Department. I am certain of the commitment of Secretary Kerry and President Obama. I can attest to the commitment of the many friends I see here in this room today who were our true partners in the past year and half. And I will promise you, from my heart, my own continued interest and involvement and support for the heart of Africa.

And again, my sincere thanks to all of you for being here today. Thank you all very much.