

Press Conference with A/S Tom Malinowski
CMR
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Ambassador Swan: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome. I'm Jim Swan, the Ambassador here in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It's my honor to introduce Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Tom Malinowski. He has a distinguished career in senior policy positions at the State Department, previously on our Policy Planning Staff, also on the National Security Council staff during the administration of President Clinton, and has served in a senior position as director of the Washington office for the well-known human rights advocacy group and non-governmental organization, Human Rights Watch. This is his first visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Welcome, and we look forward to hearing from you.

A/S Malinowski: Thank you, Ambassador, and thank you for giving us this beautiful spot to have a conversation, and thank you all for coming to join us today. I'm here in part to attend a conference that has brought judicial and other government officials together from around the Great Lakes region to talk about how we can cooperate together to better bring together institutions of justice to underserved communities in this region. I also had a chance to meet with a number of officials in the government to discuss the important democracy, human rights, and governance issues that both our governments have been talking about for some time. We met with, for example, the vice-Prime Minister for the Interior, the Foreign Minister, the Justice Minister. We met with many representatives of civil society as well as the political opposition.

Our message has been, first of all, that the United States is intensely focused on what is happening in the DRC and the Great Lakes region, particularly now. For all of the challenges that the DRC and the region still face, we do see a lot of progress, looking back over the last ten or twenty years. There has been progress in fighting impunity, progress in building democratic institutions, civil society is stronger and the people are more aware of their rights than ever before. And, as a result of this progress, we believe that the DRC has at least an opportunity to achieve a couple of major breakthroughs in next few years. First it has an opportunity to achieve a peaceful, democratic transition of power in 2016 in accordance with its constitution. It also has a chance to significantly reduce, if not end, the violence that has plagued the eastern part of the country, violence committed by organized, armed groups that prey on the civilian population. All this depends on decisions that the government must make and our ability to cooperate closely together.

So on the specific issues. First, let me say that the United States strongly supports the decision of the government, the commitment of the government, to hold national and presidential elections in 2016. Completing this whole electoral cycle, including local elections, will be challenging. And people have concerns that we are well aware of. But the important thing, in our view, is to complete the democratic transition at the top in 2016 and that no steps be taken in the meantime that would make that transition harder or lead to a delay. Now the United States has a clear and consistent position on the issue of presidential term limits and respect for constitutions, here in Africa, and beyond Africa. We believe that respect for term limits is good

for democracy and good for stability. And we've seen in other countries what happens when these principles are not respected and if we don't want to see that happen anywhere else.

In this context, we very much welcome and support the government's decision hold a dialogue with the opposition to talk about the electoral calendar and other issues. And we encourage all stakeholders, including the opposition, to take part, despite the doubts that they may feel. But the dialogue should be tightly focused on electoral issues and not used as a pretext for delay. We also spoke to the government about the importance of keeping open space for political dialogue, debate, and disagreement in the society at large, so long as it remains peaceful. Especially as the election season approaches, fundamental freedoms, including the right to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly need to be protected. And it's important here for the government to distinguish between those who speak out peacefully for change—including the young people of Congo--and those who genuinely use violence.

Finally, we had a number of conversations both with the government and the United Nations here about the situation here in the east, and the relationship between the government and MONUSCO. Everybody agrees that MONUSCO can't stay forever, that it should be drawn down in size based on an agreed set of criteria based on the conditions on the ground. But there are still armed groups in the east, including the ADF, the FDLR, and others. There are still Congolese citizens dying. The government should resume cooperation with MONUSCO and not hold people in the east hostage to a dispute over the future of the force, even if that is a legitimate dispute.

So those are the issues that we discussed. Again, I want to stress that we really do see an opportunity to get beyond some of the difficult issues that have bedeviled this country for so many years. As always, it takes political will, but if the will is there, the partnership between the United States and the DRC, I think, will provide the necessary support to achieve our common goals. Thank you. So, I look forward to your questions.

Reuters: Two quick questions if I could. I believe the U.S., if I'm not mistaken, has committed \$20M or so to the election process in Congo. Does the U.S. plan to commit additional funding, and if so, under what conditions would that take place? And my second quick question on Burundi. There is talk now of trying to find some kind of compromise. For the moment it seems that President Nkurunziza's dug in on his position of standing for a third term. Protestors are dug in on opposing that. What space for compromise do you see in the middle of those two positions?

A/S: Well, maybe I'll start with Burundi, because it remains a very urgent situation. Our position has been the same throughout. The Arusha accords have kept the peace in Burundi for many years. The Arusha accords, for very good reason, say that there should not be concentration of power in one person for too long. That time has come, and it is important for President Nkurunziza to respect the terms limits that are mandated by Arusha. And the fact is that a great many people in Burundi agree with that, including many people who are part of the president's governing coalition. And the resistance that his steps have generated among the population virtually guarantee that the country will be difficult, if not impossible, to govern, so long as he insists on maintaining his position. There has been an effort to promote a dialogue

between the government and the opposition and civil society. I believe there is still room dialogue, particularly on the question of restraining security forces who have targeted civilians, on the question of restoring freedom of assembly and the media outlets that have been closed down. But on the question of the third term, it is hard to see a solution to the crisis in which power remains concentrated in one person forever in Burundi. The Arusha accords need to be respected as part of any solution to this crisis.

And on the elections, you are absolutely right. We have committed to supporting the elections. There aren't specific conditions attached to that support. We certainly, as I mentioned in the opening statement, feel very strongly that it's important for the government to move forward as planned with the national and presidential elections in 2016. It is also extremely important to preserve space for political debate and civil society activism, for people who are critical of the government to be safe and to have that space, and these are the issues that we will be watching as this process unfolds.

La Tempete des Tropiques: [FRENCH] What is the position of the United States given the recent killings in Beni? What's the comparison between what is happening in the eastern DRC and Boko Haram in Nigeria?

A/S: Our reaction is that we are horrified by the killings of civilians in Beni. The size and strength of these predatory armed groups may have declined over the years, and that is significant. But this is a reminder that they still exist and that people are still suffering and dying. And it is a reminder that the effective forms of cooperation that have been established between the government of the Congo and the United Nations' peacekeeping forces in the east must be maintained in this period to ensure that these people will get protection. And that cooperation should not be interrupted even for a minute because there are disagreements over other important, legitimate, issues.

Boko Haram. I don't have any evidence of specific linkages, and there are important differences between the two situations. I think we should be careful about drawing connections without specific evidence. But I'm not sure if it matters very much, because what we know is enough to make it vital that we take the actions that are necessary to protect people in both places.

RFI: I have two questions, too. You were mentioning that it would be challenging for the DRC government to complete the full cycle of elections. Does that mean that you would advise the government then to postpone the local polls? And my second question would be that there are still no charges held against two young activists two and a half months after they organized a meeting with other African activists here in Kinshasa. The trial of the primary opponent Jean-Claude Muyambo has just started yesterday after more than 130 days. What do you think of that judicial situation right now in the DRC—do you condemn that situation?

A/S: [responding to the first question on local elections] When I say that it is challenging, I don't mean to say that it is impossible. I would say that are legitimate concerns that have been expressed about the budget, and about the ability of younger voters, newer voters, to take part. And those concerns need to be addressed. The bottom line for us is that this historic opportunity for a peaceful, democratic transition in 2016 should not be delayed or denied. So we hope that

the government will address those challenges in the meantime in a way that facilitates rather than delays the holding of the 2016 vote.

And with respect to the cases that you mentioned, I assume that you were referring to the Filimbi case. So, as I mentioned in my opening statement, it's important to distinguish between peaceful activists and those who may actually be involved in violence, and in that respect, we are very concerned about that case. Most of the people involved in that specific case have been released and we would hope that the same result happens with the two remaining people so that this case can be put behind us once and for all.

Top Congo FM: [FRENCH] Two questions. What have become of the special forces deployed in Uganda. As far as we know, Uganda has no terrorist issues like in the eastern part of the DRC. Question number 2 is that this has become a reason for governments in Rwanda, Congo-Brazzaville and the DRC to extend the power of leaders by collecting signatures and changing articles of the constitution which limit presidential terms. What would be the reaction of the U.S. if the people decide to make that change in their constitutions?

A/S: Sure, thanks. On the first question, I assume you're referring to the forces that have been deployed to pursue the Lord's Resistance Army. And that is an effort that we have undertaken in cooperation with all of the affected governments in the region. And the purpose is simply to protect civilian populations that have been terrorized by that group over many, many years.

With respect to the term limits question, in every country where this question has arisen, we have heard from presidents seeking to extend their terms that the people want them to stay. The reality has turned out to be very different. Of course it is possible to change a constitution, but the question is whether it is wise. Is it healthy for democracy? Is it healthy for stability? I think experience has shown us that concentrating power in one person for a very, very long time is not healthy for democracy or for stability. And I think there is evidence that the vast majority of people across Africa reject this idea. So we believe that the era of presidents for life in Africa and beyond Africa should be over. We will be consistent in making this point whether the issue arises here, or in other countries in the region, or outside of Africa.

Let's take maybe two more questions.

Africa 24: [FRENCH]: I have two questions. Have you spoken about the mass grave with judicial authorities in Congo? And what is your understanding about the human rights office of MONUSCO and the DRC government—how is the situation going to be resolved?

A/S: On the second question, I'll simply say that the partnership between the United Nations and the government of the Congo is very important at this stage to the goals that the government of the DRC has itself expressed. There have been tremendous successes out of that partnership and so we hope that the remaining problems can be resolved. With respect to the mass grave, we were very concerned about the discovery of the bodies in Maluku and we have urged the government to conduct an independent and transparent investigation, including exhuming the bodies to determine the cause of death. We appreciate the government's engagement on this

issue, we encourage them to work with international partners and civil society to help determine what happened to those people.

B-One: [FRENCH]: Two questions. The first question is on the special force sent to track down the LRA forces. The ADF are perpetrating the same kind of atrocities in the DRC—why not send a special task force to track them down as well? The second question is on the special dialogue that President Kabila has called—we know that he will extend his mandate, but what will be the position of the United States if that happens?

A/S: First, on your first question, one reason why we establish the task force to address the problem of the LRA was the MONUSCO was already deeply committed to dealing with the insecurity in the Kivus and other parts of eastern Congo, and many thought it was overextended. Also, because the LRA operated in several different countries beyond the reach of MONUSCO. With respect to the terrible violence in Beni, the military force to deal with the problem exist. The challenge is to employ it effectively and cooperatively to achieve the goal.

On your second questions, as is usually the case with American officials, I don't want to talk in hypotheticals. The government has made a commitment to hold these elections in 2016, there has been no change in the constitution, and we strongly support the government's commitment to that.

Thank you.