



DRC: WFP Helicopter Crash

Social Media Monitoring

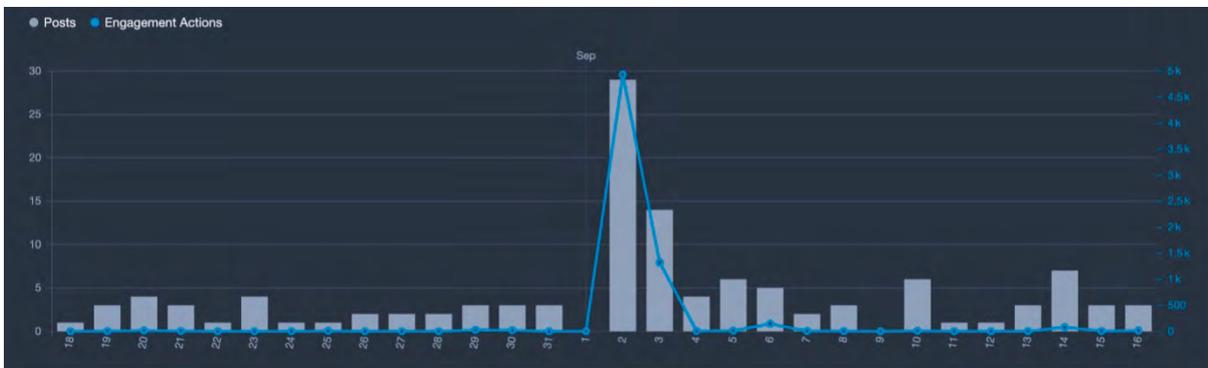
November 2022

Context

On 2 September 2022 a United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) helicopter managed by the World Food Programme (WFP) crashed in the Mashanga area of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), resulting in the injury of three personnel on board. The area is located in the Virunga National Park, around 13 km from Goma city in North Kivu province. The cause of the crash is currently not publicly known.

An analysis conducted by Insecurity Insight of the public reactions to the incident on DRC social media platforms confirms a longstanding trend of general mistrust expressed on such platforms towards some UN organisations operating in the eastern DRC, a sentiment that tends to surface in response to unfortunate events of this kind.

Number of Facebook and Twitter posts and engagements related to the WFP, 18 August-16 September 2022



Note: "Posts" refers to the aggregation of Facebook and Twitter social media posts originating from an IP address registered in the DRC that referenced "programme alimentaire mondial" (i.e. the French term for the WFP) or "PAM" (the related acronym). Any mainstream newspaper article published via the newspaper's Facebook or Twitter account is also counted as a social media post. "Engagements" refers to the total number of engagement actions on the social media posts, including likes, shares, comments and retweets. Source: Insecurity Insight

Reactions on social media

Analysis of social media users' reaction to the incident points to a general underlying mistrust of the WFP and other UN organisations operating in eastern DRC. Social media users who commented on the story tended to overwhelmingly express negative opinions towards the WFP in the wake of the incident, including by comments such as "God be praised" and "good news."¹

Very few commentators expressed sympathy with the victims of the crash, while some lamented the victims' survival of the incident, such as in the following comments: "They should die even, these criminal looters"² or "Why are they not dead?"³

Generally, commentators highlighted two major recurrent claims:

- **The helicopter was carrying valuable minerals extracted/stolen from the mineral-rich Congolese regions.**

Commentators often referred to WFP aid workers as "looters" and "bandits" who were pillaging the DRC's natural resources under the cover of aid work. One commentator, for example, wrote that the victims are "hiding behind WFP to in fact loot us",⁴ while another said: "The looters will all die. [They are working] under the cover of the WFP, but they do other things."⁵

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Users regularly attributed the cause of the crash to the heavy weight of the minerals allegedly on board the helicopter. Remarks such as “Without doubt [the helicopter crashed due to] the exaggerated quantity of minerals”⁶ or “They loaded too much cobalt without knowing that it is heavy, [hence the] result” were common.⁷

- **The helicopter was transporting supplies in the form of armaments or food to rebel groups active in the region.**

Partially underlying this allegation were two elements that attracted social media users’ attention and fed into the widespread impression that the WFP is abetting armed groups.⁸

Firstly, apparently genuine images of the victims showed them dressed in clothes resembling military uniforms,⁹ leading some to question why this is the case or to allege that the incident’s victims were soldiers or mercenaries.¹⁰

Secondly, the helicopter crash occurred in the Virunga National Park, where armed groups are active. A commentator, for example, was not alone in expressing the following: “They went to feed which population at the park? Suspicious! Pay attention to these agents!”¹¹

Another pertinent example is the following comment: “What did they head off for in the park? This organisation worries me greatly.”¹²

Typical comments linking the WFP helicopter to rebel militias included the following:

“What was this plain transporting? For sure munitions and arms for armed groups”;¹³ “It is them [the WFP] who nourish the war”;¹⁴ “The suppliers of armed groups and terrorists”;¹⁵ and “All those implicated in the DRC’s insecurity will pay a hefty price.”¹⁶

Although most social media users referred to armed groups in general, some linked the WFP to two rebel groups in particular: the March 23 Movement (M23)¹⁷ and Mai-Mai militia.¹⁸

An image that circulated on social media reportedly showing the three helicopter crash victims following the incident.

Insecurity Insight could not fully verify the veracity of the image. Source: Facebook



“Encore PAM!!!!”¹⁹ Reputational challenges to the WFP’s presence in eastern DRC

Social media users’ reaction to the WFP helicopter crash also indicates that two previous incidents involving the organisation were a relevant factor in the way in which social media account users interpreted this event.

In April 2020, 296 tons of WFP rice supplies had to be **destroyed** after Congolese authorities declared the food stocks to be unfit for human consumption. In February 2021 the Italian ambassador to the DRC was **killed** when a WFP convoy was ambushed while travelling through Virunga park.

Social media **analysis** conducted by Insecurity Insight at the time of these events noted a negative impact on the organisation’s reputational standing among local residents in the DRC, not least because of the disinformation surrounding the incidents.²⁰

For example, referring to the destroyed food supplies, a social media user commented: “These bastards should die, they say that they help but we already know that their aid is poisoned.”²¹

Another user linked the helicopter crash to the incident involving the ambassador: “After ... the death of the Italian ambassador in a WFP vehicle, the WFP finds itself again in the affair of the helicopter with its white, uniformed military personnel on board. These people make fun of this. We should shut down the WFP in DRC. It is a detrimental organisation.”²²

The threat of negative reputational overspill: the case of MONUSCO

The civil unrest demanding the departure of UN peacekeeping forces in the DRC and the **ensuing violence** that rocked the country in recent months has laid bare the deep unpopularity of MONUSCO in the Congo.²³

International NGOs and intergovernmental agencies risk being seen as “guilty by association” by local residents who may not differentiate between different organisations and their varying missions.

As a UN agency, the WFP is particularly at risk in this regard, as evidenced by some of the comments in response to the helicopter incident.

Indeed, the WFP and MONUSCO were associated together in a number of comments by social media users. One remarked: “Their objective is the minerals. They must leave along with their sister MONUSCO. Never trust them.”²⁴

MONUSCO peacekeeper shown hauling a sack of precious minerals dripping in blood while a March 23 Movement militant holds a Congolese woman draped in the national flag with a bloodied machete above her head as she tries to reach for the minerals, implying collusion between the peacekeeper and the militant.

Source: Facebook, sourced from social media monitoring in August 2022, during the height of the anti-MONUSCO protests in the DRC.



Recommendations for aid agencies

- Be aware of the extent to which a variety of incidents, and how they are discussed on social media, can influence attitudes towards the wider aid sector.
- Maintain a high situational awareness of any allegations against the aid sector.
- Communicate your neutrality, impartiality and independence clearly, regularly and proactively.
- If you negotiate access with armed actors, ensure that the general public does not misperceive this as providing logistical support to rebels.
- Clearly communicate your relationship with or independence from the UN peacekeeping mission.
- Express any communications about your organisation's humanitarian principles in easily accessible local language.
- Train staff to be effective ambassadors for your humanitarian neutrality.
- Develop a plan for responding to the circulation of misleading information and misinformed social media discussions.

Data and methodology

The data used for this bulletin originates from two sources:

1. a search for all Facebook and Twitter social media posts that included the words "Programme alimentaire mondial" or "PAM" published on social media with IP addresses in the DRC between 2 and 16 September 2022. This search yielded a total of 87 posts for analysis. This includes news articles published by mainstream media outlets on their social media sites; and
2. all public engagement actions on social media in reaction to the published posts. Public engagement actions included likes, shares, retweets, favourites and comments. The analysis included 6,530 engagement actions, including comments.

The analysis is centred specifically on public engagement in the form of comments in reaction to the incident. Focussing on public engagement actions, and on comments in particular, provides rich data on public sentiment in relation to the topic.

We carried out qualitative analysis of the public posts and comments about these posts. Comments by social media users are summarised to paint a picture of the kinds of sentiments expressed regarding the event and the actors involved.

Social media users

The views quoted here appear to be the expressed opinions of Congolese citizens. Manual verification of the Facebook profiles of social media users quoted in this study indicates that these citizens' profiles appear to be genuine. There was no strong indication that the profiles were fake or that the posted comments were orchestrated to deliberately damage the UN's reputation or incite violence.

Most social media users quoted in this report do not appear to be particularly politically engaged, based on their social media profiles.

- Two of the accounts quoted in this report had posted some pro-Russian material, including a video recording of a pro-Russia demonstration by Congolese civilians in Paris and a video of the president of Mali giving a speech at the UN General Assembly in which he criticises the French government.
- One account contained biographical details and professional affiliations that upon verification were confirmed to be false. It is not clear whether the individual lied about their professional and educational achievements or whether the account itself was fake in the sense that the person claiming to be behind the comments did not exist and the account was used by an unidentified person to comment on incidents in the DRC.

Further resources

- Social Media Monitoring: [CENI and the Red Cross](#) DRC (July 2022).
- Social Media Monitoring: [Downing of a UN Helicopter](#) (May 2022).
- SHCC 2021 Violence Against or Obstruction of Health Care in the DRC Factsheet: Available in [English](#) and [French](#)
- Website: insecurityinsight.org/country-pages/democratic-republic-of-the-congo
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- Attacks on Health Care Bi-Monthly [News Briefs](#): Available since October 2017
- Attacks on Health Care News Briefs [Dataset](#): Available on HDX.

- 1 "Dieu soit loué; bonne nouvelle."
- 2 "Ils devraient même mourir, ces voleurs criminels."
- 3 "Pourquoi il ne sont pas morts?"
- 4 "Ils sont couverts sous PAM pour bien nous piller."
- 5 "Ils vont tous mourir les voleurs. Sous couvert du programme alimentaire mondial mais ils font autres choses."
- 6 "La quantité exagéré de minerais sans doute."
- 7 "Ils ont trop chargée le coltan ne sachant pas que sa pèse conséquence "
- 8 As will be seen later in this bulletin, the suspicion that the WFP is linked to armed groups in eastern DRC is not new.
- 9 The uniforms shown in the media are likely to be those used by regular pilot service personnel in the UNHAS.
- 10 Some examples of these comments are as follows: "Ils ressemblent aux mercenaires; C'est qui est paradoxal c'est de voir les rescapés de ce prétendu PAM en tenue militaire; Sont des soldats .ca fait peur; Sont suspect ces gens avec des soldats; Des mercenaires; Ce sont des mercenaires américains; Des mercenaires venu ravitailler les rebelles bazui ils se déguisent en aide humanitaire n'importe quoi."
- 11 "Ils sont allés alimenté quelle population là au parc? Suspect déjà! Attention avec ces agents!"
- 12 "Ils ont parti faire quoi en plein parc? Cette organisation m'inquiète bcp [i.e. beaucoup]."
- 13 "Que transportez cet avion? Munitions et armes, certes, pour les groupes armés."
- 14 "C'est eux qui alimentent cette guerre."
- 15 "Les ravitailleurs des groupes armés et des terroristes."
- 16 "Tous ceux qui sont impliqués dans l'insécurité de la RDC payeront cher."
- 17 "They support the M23[,] God is just." ("Il soutient les m23 Dieu est juste.")
- 18 "WFP has helicopters too? For tons of sacks of rice and flour for the Mai[-Mai]." ("PAM a des hélicoptères aussi? Pour des tonnes des sacs des riz et farines des mai's.")
- 19 "WFP again!!!!" This was a comment written by a social media user in reaction to the news of the WFP helicopter crash.
- 20 Indeed, in the case of the inedible food supplies, **posts were widely shared** accusing the WFP of supplying "poison" and of there being plans for the "extermination" of the local population. Regarding the incident involving the Italian ambassador, social media users **accused the WFP of stealing natural resources** and abetting armed groups. This claim was widely disseminated to the extent that following the incident a WFP truck was intercepted by youths in Butembo (North Kivu) and taken to local authorities for its contents to be publicly investigated for the presence of armaments.
- 21 "Ils devraient mourir ces enfoirés ils disent qu'ils aide mais on le sait déjà que leurs aides sont empoisonnées."
- 22 "Après l'affaire de minerais à l'est, la mort de l'ambassadeur de l'Italie dans le véhicule du PAM, le PAM se retrouve encore dans l'affaire de l'hélicoptère avec à son bord des militaires blancs en tenue. Ces gens se moquent de nous. On doit fermer le PAM en RDC. C'est une organisation malsaine."
- 23 UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC.
- 24 "Leur unique objectif c'est les minerais. Qu'ils dégagent avec leur soeur MONUSCO. Never trust them." (Note: the final sentence was in English in the source.)

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