

International Women's Day

Crisis for Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo – How the UN and international community can help?

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Putney Methodist Church,
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Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is often characterised as one of the most – if not the most – neglected humanitarian crises in the world. The often-cited International Rescue Committee (IRC) mortality survey – updated in 2008 – estimates that, between August 1998 and April 2007, armed conflict and state collapse led to 5.4 million excess deaths. Following the signing of peace accords in 2003, a gradual shift from humanitarian relief to post-conflict recovery has occurred. The resumption of armed conflict in 2007 between forces loyal to General Laurent Nkunda and the Congolese army (FARDC) in the province of North Kivu, a conflict which escalated in October 2008 to international attention, has revealed the fragile state of the transition process. With the country stuck between war and peace, targeting humanitarian assistance has become increasingly difficult.

The fate of Congo was very much decided in the 19th century at the Berlin conference (which divided Africa, 'the scramble for Africa'), where King Leopold manipulated the other Western powers to give him Congo. King Leopold treated the then Congo Free state as his own private fiefdom, having reduced the population from 20 million people to 10 million in 40 years - the biggest genocide in history.

Crisis for women and conflict in DRC

The war situation has made the life of women more precarious. Violence against women seems to be perceived by large sectors of society to be normal. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence, Yakin Ertürk, who toured eastern Congo in July 2007, violence against women in North and South Kivu included "unimaginable brutality". "Armed groups attack local communities, loot, rape, kidnap women and children and make them work as sexual slaves,"

In December 2008 Guardian Films posted a film on the Guardian Newspaper website profiling a project to record the testimony of over 400 women and girls who had been abused by marauding militia.

In the DRC, an invisible war has been going around for 12 years where UN peacekeepers (Monuc) are not only producing any results but according to some observers they are actually standing by as the perpetrators massacre people. Over five million dead, hundreds of thousands of women and girls raped and sexually tortured in the most unimaginable ways, 800,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) since January 2009 and close to 350,000 forced to flee to neighbouring countries. This violence is fuelled by the world's need for minerals, most recently due to the economic crisis. Congo, one of the most mineral-rich country in Africa, has become the stage for a regional war fuelled by economic interests – a resource war backed by extraction of minerals.

The situation of the recent crisis in DRC has been described in a recent article by John le Carré:

'We are talking of a country being held to ransom, a country that has no memory of deciding its own fate, only of desperate need, terrible violence and self-hatred, and the rule of the gun.'

The Congolese society has been denied, for generation after generation, even the most elementary medical care and millions like them are the real victims of near-perpetual warfare. On any average day of the year, 1,450 Congolese die of war's twin side-effects: disease and malnutrition.

How did it happen? Where to begin? Nowhere on earth has suffered more terribly from the consequences of colonial rule than Congo. The very word colonial doesn't begin to encompass the scale of human misery, greed and cruelty that have been visited on Congo by foreign predators

throughout its history, whether we talk of Arab slavers or the pillaging of the country's people and riches by the appalling King Leopold of the Belgians, or the murder in 1961, with Belgian and US connivance, of Congo's first elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, just one year after the country obtained its independence.

And who was America's choice to replace Lumumba, seen as too leftist, too nationalist, too unpredictable? One Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, whose 30 years of ever more demented misrule, corruption and proxy wars against perceived enemies of western alliance reduced Congo to a condition of social and economic collapse from which it is still to recover. Those with a mind to explore the horror of Congo's wars over the last 50 years can do no better than treat themselves to Michela Wrong's *In the Footsteps of Mr Kurtz* and Thomas Pakenham's *The Scramble For Africa*.

But its own wars aside, Congo's greatest misfortune has been to play host to the wars of other countries. In the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, Hutu insurgents fled across the border and used eastern Congo as a base from which to launch attacks on their Tutsi enemies still in Rwanda. When the Tutsis retaliated in kind, it was Congo that paid the blood price.

The first Congo war had barely raged itself out before the second followed. Warlords ruled. Roaming militias fought, looted and killed at will. Mass rape and the mutilation of women became a military weapon, destroying tribal and family life. Still today, in eastern Congo, thousands of men and children are condemned to slave labour in gold, diamond and tin mines, frequently at Congolese army gunpoint, always in unimaginably appalling conditions. Congo's mineral reserves are one of the largest on the planet, yet three-quarters of its population live on less than a dollar a day. Mining companies raise billions on stock markets, but 60m Congolese have yet to see the smallest benefit from their country's wealth.

The role of media in worsening the conflict

The west too often views an entire continent as gripped by corruption, tribal conflict, human disasters and bizarre goings-on. It is a place of exotic, bizarre and unexplainable goings-on.

The way a large part of the western press have portrayed the attack by separatists in Angola on the Togolese football team as if it happened in South Africa is typical of prejudice against the continent. Stereotyping of Africa, its problems and solutions, has devastating consequences. It has helped retard the continent's development.

For starters, if this terrible incident had not taken place, the African Nations Cup would have been a little footnote in most reports. "Africa" is still often only in the news only because of war, as a development "burden" or as a humanitarian crisis.

Often, for example in the 2008 crisis in the Congo, the conflict is framed as one of "tribal" wars, but neglect the crucial element of western companies fuelling the conflict, by paying off rebel factions. Because this important element of the strife is not covered, western governments do not have the complete picture and therefore come up with inappropriate policies on Africa.

The devastation the HIV/Aids pandemic is wreaking on the continent is a fact. Incidents have been reported of men targeting girls younger than eight for sex in the misguided belief that it will cure them.

Reading some of the reports it would seem that every African male in every village, township and city somehow clings to this belief.

For Africans to deny problems exist, or not take active responsibility, won't help. Africa's problems are real. But looking for solutions through prejudiced western eyes will not bring appropriate solutions. It reinforces stereotypical views, and in turn public cynicism. It encourages the belief that Africa's problems are so exotic they are beyond resolving, or deserve simplistic solutions.

Are UN peacekeepers holding the peace? What more can they do?

The mandate of the UN Peacekeeping mission in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, known by the acronym MONUC (United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo), includes 45 discreet tasks and responsibilities, not the least of which is the protection of civilians in the hilly, densely forested, nearly inaccessible provinces of North and South Kivu in the east of the country.

MONUC has been facing a "very unique situation" since it was effectively engaged in three military operations at once: alongside the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC) against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA); against the militias in Ituri; and against the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) in the Kivus. The Mission, the largest United Nations peacekeeping operation deployed anywhere in the world, is facing all the challenges faced by any mission, including the use of force and the protection of civilians. At the same time, the UN peacekeepers are under increasing pressure from the current president, Joseph Kabila, to find an exit strategy, eager to solidify his power before the elections next year.

The UN and the Congolese have not been able to tackle the rebel leader, Bosco Ntaganda, who is wanted by the international criminal court. Alan Doss, the UN Representative for the DRC, said recently:

"The support which the UN mission, Monuc, gives to the national army is unrelated to Bosco's freedom. It is unfair to colour Monuc's assistance to the army, which is mandated by the UN security council, as a "pact with the devil". The UN have stated many times that if the Congolese authorities ask Monuc to help deliver Ntaganda to the international criminal court, they will do so. But President Kabila has chosen to set aside action against Bosco for now. While many might wish otherwise, UN peacekeepers in the DRC have no more jurisdiction to pluck someone from a tennis court in Goma than they would have in Wimbledon."

The fact remains that both rebel leaders of National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP), Laurent Nkunda and Bosco Ntaganda must face justice for their heinous crimes against humanity. The UN and the international criminal court should play an active role in bringing these rebel leaders to face up to their crimes.

The humanitarian role of UNICEF in the DRC

Recently UNICEF launched a \$1.2 billion appeal aimed at providing "life saving emergency assistance to millions of children and women in dire need. The appeal is part of UNICEF's Humanitarian Action Report 2010, released in Geneva ... which spotlights the desperate situation of children and women in 28 countries and territories facing deep humanitarian crises. "UNICEF's three biggest operations are in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Ethiopia.

For the countries on the list, UNICEF has said, *"urgent action is imperative to save lives, ensure access to safe water, adequate sanitation and hygiene, health, nutrition and to protect children against the worst forms of violence and abuse, and to provide children with an education even under the worst of circumstances."*

Actions for moving forward and recommendations

The UN and the international community should take actions to ensure equality between women and men:

- Integration of a gender perspective into the implementation of all relevant international instruments;
- Further implementation of international instruments promoting equality between women and men and the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women
- Promote equality between women and men in economic, social and political decision making;
- Provision of support and assistance to women who have become victims of any forms of violence, including in the home, workplace and during armed conflicts;

Other recommendations are below:

1. Ratification the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

The DRC ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and presents the periodical reports to the CEDAW. However, the fact remains that the DRC has neither ratified nor signed the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

2. Reform of the Family Code and of other discriminatory legislation toward women.

In spite of the ratification of the Convention in 1986, the Congolese State did not respect its commitment at the moment of the elaboration of the Family Code in 1987. That Code was supposed to improve the Congolese Civil Code with regard to women. Indeed, the Congolese legislators chose to work on the organisation of the family by abrogating for example the father's authority preferring parental authority instead. The code also affirms the principle of freedom of marriage. The promotion of the status of Congolese women partly constituted the Congolese reform.

3. Reinforce the role of the National Council of Women (Conseil National de la Femme)

The State must allocate the necessary budget for the effective implementation of the national programme for the promotion and protection of Congolese women. The State's actions are limited to the written word and not enough concrete action. The national programme for the promotion of Congolese women does not generally work due to the lack of real commitment by the State, who principally waits for a gesture from donors. Because of the lack of concrete results, these have become more reticent in sustaining the governmental action.

4. Real effectiveness of the new law on the repression of sexual violence

The law against sexual violence, recently adopted by the parliament, shall be quickly promulgated by the President and the perpetrators of violence will be punished, while the victims should be reintegrated into society. The government must introduce laws protect victims and to give them adequate reparation and psychological, social and sanitary assistance. A plan for helping victims of

sexist violence must be set up in order to secure psychological, social and health assistance to women victims of rape, of physical violence, of genital mutilation, etc. A specific compensation should be accorded in provinces where women are particularly victims of violence linked to the armed conflict.

5. Consideration of the criteria of gender

The criterion of gender has not been taken into consideration regarding the recruitment of civil and military personnel responsible for law enforcement. In fact, this holds true for every sector of public life in the DRC. Consequently, the number of men is promoted in comparison to women and the training dispensed does not integrate gender-specific aspects to respecting human rights in law enforcement. The impact of culture on a subject as sensitive as rape and sexual violence against women and female children necessitates employing a significant number of women in the police, armed forces, security services, penitentiary administration, judiciary and the bar.

7. Non-sexist education at any age

The education for Congolese girls will go a long way to prevent future sexist violence. Most children have been witnesses or victims of violence. The impact on boys of violence against their mothers or other women risks influencing their perception and representation of women. In the same way girls will internalise fear, suffering and a vision of a masculine domination that it is difficult to change later. Such education could also be taught as widely as possible, such as in to administrators, police and hospital staff, in order to sensitise adults to the problem of equality between women and men, especially in their familial and intimate relationships.

What is to be done? A better question is: what is not to be done? Suggested list is as follows:

- **Promote democracy** We must not take shelter behind the notion of democracy as a cure-all. Yes, yes, it was admirable and right that Congo, in 2006, held its first free – or fairly free – elections since the murder of Lumumba. Democracy at last. But little has changed. And little can. Without a civil society to support it, how can democracy act as a panacea? The hope is the election next year will bring better results.
- **Support education, medical systems and a functioning judiciary** We are talking of a country 1,300km long, most of it forested, with a largely illiterate population whose size can be only roughly estimated, with neither a functioning judiciary nor a police force, nor a basic educational or medical system, and barely a hard road; of a country, just as before, being held to ransom by its own government, army and rival militias, in every avenue of life, be it mining, trade or elementary social mechanisms; of a country that has no memory of deciding its own fate, only of desperate need, terrible violence and self-hatred, and the rule of the gun.
- **Encourage good governance and expose rogue deals by international institutions** Neither should we take shelter behind the easy notion of economic aid – or not without first insisting on the donors' right (and obligation) to follow every penny of the cash all the way to its proper destination. With corruption endemic at every level of life – and raised to an art form by Congo's less scrupulous western trading partners – the hardest trick in the box is to bring aid where it is most desperately needed. The same can hardly be said for the World Bank, which looked on while the government signed away 75% of its copper and cobalt reserves in three highly questionable deals that yielded next to nothing for its state or people.

Conclusion

The continuing human tragedy of Congo is not a statistic. It is a continuing human tragedy. It is 1,450 tragedies every day. It is countless more if you include the orphaned, the bereaved, the widowed and all the ripples of truncated lives that spread from a single death.

Let me quote from one of India's great saint, Guru Nanak, "All great men are born out of women - so why condemn, insult, degrade, rape, kill and dishonour women?" Let me also add, why throughout the centuries has unfair treatment, denial of voting rights till the last century and unequal pay been the norm for women?

Many men have come to believe that violence against a woman, child, or another man is an acceptable way to control another person. By remaining silent about the violence, we allow other men to poison our environments. We also allow the picture of men as dangerous to stay alive. Domestic violence is a problem within existing masculinity and it is we, as men, who have to stop it.

The high cost of the gender injustice and machismo that still pervades in DRC and many societies by virtue of which women experience continual violence both in war and peace must be stopped.

I have never had the privilege of visiting the DRC, even though I was invited but not able to go owing to other commitments. So I have to be content with quoting from John Le Carre (British novelist) and John Rankin (photographer), who made the following observations:

John Le Carre stated,

'But Congo has one secret that is hard to pass on if you haven't learned it at first hand. Look –carefully and you will find a gaiety of spirit and a love of life that, even in the worst of times, leave the pampered westerner moved and humbled beyond words.'

John Rankin says about DRC,

"He never heard anyone moan. In London people are always griping - about their relationships, their mortgages, the trains being late," he said. "In Congo there's none of that constant analysis and portraying yourself as a victim. People live with conflict and poverty, but there's so much humanity, a deep instinct to help one another."

Thank you for listening

Notes

- 1) Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: An Ongoing Crisis, International Rescue Committee (IRC), January 2008)
- 2) The Independent, *'Rankin in Africa: Images of love in a land of conflict,'* 11 February 2010
- 3) William Gumede, *'Africa remains shrouded in myth,'* 16th January 2010
- 4) The Guardian, *'Hell on Earth: John le Carre on Congo,'* 16th January 2010
- 5) Vijay Mehta, *'The UN, Human Rights and Liberty: Achievements, failures and prospects for the future,'* Speech given at UNA Putney. 19th January 2010
- 6) The Medical News, *'\$1.2B needed to aid women, children in 28 countries 'in crisis,' UNICEF says,'* 6 February 2010
- 7) Humanitarian Exchange Magazine, *'Targeting humanitarian assistance in post-conflict DRC,'* December 2008
- 8) Better world links on Congo <http://www.betterworldlinks.org/index.php?cat=1504>
- 9) Adam Hochschild, *'King Leopold's Ghost,'* 1998
- 10) New York Times, *'Peacekeepers to withdraw from parts of Congo,'* 4 March 2010
- 11) The Economist, *'Gendercide,'* 4th March 2010
- 12) The Guardian, *'Response: The UN mission in Congo has not signed a 'pact with the devil,'* March 2010

The full version of this speech can be downloaded from:

- VM Centre for Peace www.vmpeace.org
- Action for UN Renewal www.action-for-un-renewal.org.uk

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Fortune Forum charity (www.fortuneforum.org) convenes global leaders, celebrity activists, philanthropists, influential entrepreneurs and media moguls to collectively make a difference. Fortune Forum has held three summits in London since 2006. The summits have attracted a worldwide audience of 1.3 billion people (one fifth of humanity) including print and media coverage. Previous keynote speakers include Bill Clinton, former US President and Al Gore, former US vice-President, and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize 2007.

Vijay Mehta has appeared in various TV programmes including BBC World, Press TV, Aجتak-24 hour Indian news channel, and Think Peace documentary, Canada, among others. His work has been regularly featured in the respected international press including The Sunday Times, the Independent, Observer, Irish Times, and Guardian newspapers. His life is devoted to the service of peace, non-violence and humanity. The motto of his life is "Giving is living"