Africa: A Troubled Continent (10)

Congo: A Perpetual War Zone (1)

The Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC] lies in the heart of what was Darkest Africa to 19th century Europeans, a country of nightmarish horror according to Joseph Conrad's 1899 novel, *Heart of Darkness.*

In area it is the second largest country on the continent with an immense territory of a million square miles. When it became independent in 1960, it had more inhabitants than any other African country except South Africa and Nigeria. Its nationals were Bantu, Sudanese, pygmies, Nicolitcs, and Hamites and were divided into many tribes. The DRC has enormous natural wealth. It has an abundance of copper and other minerals. Cash crops are still important to the economy, although it is mineral and extensive hydroelectric resources, and mining industries that make DRC potentially one of Africa's richest countries. It leads the world as a cobalt producer and ranks second in diamonds (mainly industrial diamonds). But despite all its natural resources, the DRC is one of the world's poorest nations. While famine does not threaten as in some areas, the struggle for survival affects the vast majority of the population. But if the DRC has so much potential wealth, why the downward economic spiral which affects every part of its infrastructure?

Ever since independence the DRC has known nothing but turmoil, corruption, oppression, and intertribal warfare. On February 21, 1961, the United Nations [UN] Security Council in resolution S/4741 declared it was greatly concerned about the continuing deterioration in the Congo, and "the prevalence of conditions which seriously imperil peace and order, and the unity and territorial integrity of the Congo, and threaten international peace and security."

And it noted "with deep regret and concern the systematic violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms and the general absence of rule of law in the Congo." But the DRC's perpetual warfare shows the United Nations' failure' to act on behalf of the suffering Congolese. A recent example will suffice. On the morning of Thursday, September 5, 2002, Ngiti tribal militiamen and rebel soldiers of the DRC national army, their faces plastered in paint and leaf rings encircling their heads, attacked Nyankunde, an African village town, where The Evangelical Medical Centre Cooperative of six mission organizations had joined forces to serve the medical and spiritual needs of the immediate population of around 8 million. The assault turned into a bloodbath, devastating the entire village, leaving homes, shops, offices, and medical facilities looted and destroyed. As people fled, rebels indiscriminately shot innocent men, women, and children. Mission workers say Ngiti fighters killed 1,000 people in the first hours of the attack. One eyewitness reported, "It is difficult to know how many people were killed, because (victims) were abandoned. Roads were blocked and many people trapped. Nothing at all left at Nyankunde, and the area is totally inaccessible." But the outside world paid little attention.

The UN has not "rushed to assist," said Brook Ford, a missionary at Nyankunde. And until recently Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Uganda, and Rwanda were all involved in what has been described as Africa's equivalent of the First Word War. Perhaps two million Congolese have died in this conflict. Why the deafening silence of the West? Why is there no outcry about this slaughter? Is it because it occurred so far from the focus of media activity, or because of the little risk of superpower involvement, or because the DRC has neither weapons of mass destruction nor an international terrorist base, unlike Iraq?

History of Congo

Congo was "discovered" before the Americas. In 1482 the Portugese explorer Diego Cao located the mouth of the Congo River, and established the first tenuous European contact with that part of the world. Within ten years of his expedition, Roman Catholic (RC) missionaries arrived.

And before long the king of the powerful Kongo tribe had been baptized with many of his subjects. But the initial success of the RC mission work evaporated through compromise with the Portugese ""Black ivory" (slave) trade, which revived tribal hatreds and promoted continual warfare. Battles meant slaves. Slaves meant baubles and rum from shrewd European traders. By the early 19th century there was little trace left of living Christianity. Abolition of slavery brought an end to easy money. European influence in the interior did not begin until the late 19th century, after the explorations of Henry Morton Stanley in 1874-7,whose arduous expedition to find Dr. Livingstone (1872) had brought him fame. His later expeditions were financed by King Leopold II of Belgium.

Leopold II (1835-1909)

The "Congo Free State" had been created and granted personally to King Leopold II of Belgium by the European powers at the Berlin Conference (1884-85) which divided up Africa. All the colonial powers promised to suppress slavery and in particular to take steps for the extermination of the traffic in slaves. They were also told to encourage all enterprises of a religious, scientific, or charitable character directed to the improvement and uplift of the Africans. But from the start Leopold treated his newly acquired possession as a veritable private treasure house. He sold concessions to European and American businessmen, who made fortunes and paid him enough royalties to maintain his extravagantly lavish lifestyle. Leopold's business deals led in some cases to severe exploitation of the Congolese from 1895 to 1908. The treatment of workers was unbelievably harsh. For not making his quota, a man might be flogged or have his hand chopped off. Or his wife and children might be kept as hostages. Whole villages were depopulated to get more rubber. Perhaps the greatest contribution of the missionaries of this period was the movement to have Leopold's domain taken away from him. Missionaries took up the task of defending human rights of the African people against colonial exploitation. In May 1896, mission pioneer Harry Guinness traveled to Brussels to intervene with Leopold. He told the king what he learned about the horrendous

exploitation in the Congo. Other Protestant as well as "ungrateful" R.C. missionaries reported to their constituents the same tales of horror. In response to all this criticism, Leopold deeded his private domain to the responsible sovereignty of the Belgian government. While running the Congo as his private fiefdom, he did nothing for the advancement of the Congolese. Neither Leopold nor later the Belgian government started any schools, and so any education that was available came from the mission schools.

Roman Catholic Missions

R.C. missionaries started to come again to Congo in the 1880s, nearly a decade after the Protestant pioneers. Because of Leopold's interests in the Congo, he wanted only Belgian Catholic missionaries. The work begun by the French RC had to be modified so that Belgian missionaries could become involved. Leopold obtained from the Pope the reservation of the area for Belgian missions. He asked the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, of Belgian origin, and Belgian Jesuits to send representatives. The former undertook the responsibility in 1888 and the latter early in the 1890s. Soon Leopold realized that there were not enough Belgian Catholics to do all the work, and so he allowed other Europeans to enter Congo. In 1914 more RC societies were working in Congo than in any other country in the sub-Saharan Africa. The majority of the RC missionaries were Belgians, but British, Dutch, Italian, and other nationalities also served in Congo. Belgium's colonial administration freely granted sites with large tracts of land to the RC missions and also transported their supplies to these posts on state vessels, greatly helping them in expanding their activities. This cooperation between church and state was far closer than was wise and right, but it was no surprise. Congo was Belgium's only colonial possession and in the 19th and early 20th centuries the Roman Catholic Church was very vigorous in that country. The RC missions sent large foreign staffs to Congo. They engaged teachers for stations and village schools. However, they did not ordain the first Congolese priest until 1917, and the number of priests in 1959 totaled approximately 400. The first bishop was consecrated in 1956, but in 1971 the majority of the 34 bishops were still foreigners. The RC relationship with the Protestants was fractious. There was hardly a trace of understanding or cooperation between these two major branches of Christianity. In fact, it was taken for granted by the majority of RC that the Protestants were their enemy. This attitude was clearly seen in a directive alleged to have been issued from the Propaganda in the early days of the Congo missions: "The heretics are to be followed up and their efforts harassed and destroyed." But the Belgian government didn't only favor the RC, it also did not like Protestant missionaries because most of the latter were non-Belgian. In 1895, Protestant missionary societies came under the jurisdiction of Belgium's RC government. However, as the Berlin Conference had insisted on religious tolerance, the Protestants were allowed to continue their various ministries.

Protestant Missions

The establishment of the Christian mission work in the DRC owes much to missionary-explorer David Livingstone (1813-73), who drew the world's attention to Central Africa.

In 1878 the first Protestant mission began working in Congo. It was called the Livingstone Inland Mission [LIM].

About the same time the Baptist Missionary Society of England was also trying to work in the same area. By 1880 the LIM had been established and staffed three mission stations, although many of the early missionaries suffered from malaria and fever. In the early 1880s the LIM decided to hand over its pioneer work to the American Baptist Mission.

In 1886, black American Baptist missionaries arrived in Congo to further this work. The success of the British Baptist and American Baptist societies soon attracted other American missions. The reason for the large number of American societies working in Congo at this time was that Leopold was not afraid that the Americans would try to take his "Congo Free State" away from him, like the French or German nationals might try to do. The presence of so many different mission societies called for a unified approach to both the government and outreach work.

As early as the 1902 General Conference of Missions in Leopoldville (Kinshasha), the need for cooperation was seen within the Protestant missionary movement. In 1912 Africa Inland Mission [AIM] established one of the largest missions in the northern part of Congo. The society extended its ministry over 1200 miles of Congo territory and proclaimed the Gospel to about 20 tribes. The Lord richly blessed the Protestant mission work. In the two decades between the two World Wars the number of converts more than doubled. To unite the great variety of Protestant missions and churches the Congo Protestant Council (CPP) was created in 1928. Its aim was to build up one "Church of Christ in Congo." During this period the leadership of the church was largely still an expatriate missionary affair, but in 1960 the CPP voted to transfer its administrative responsibility into national hands and for missionaries to assume the role of advisors and technicians. In 1970, the CPP until then a group of separate denominations, became the national Protestant Church of Zaire [ECZ] with most of all DRC's 97 Protestant churches as members. But this ecumenical body was not the result of a grassroots movement. It came into being through both government edict and pressure from some church leaders, though many evangelical leaders are now in favor of their membership in the ECZ.

There have been positive benefits. Patrick Johnstone notes that the divisiveness of tribalism in the churches has been diminished, unnecessary competition reduced, and cooperation in training schemes and media increased.

Ministries

From the beginning of their mission work the RC made an enormous effort in the field of education. Aided by Belgian government funds, they established many schools. The major emphasis was on the primary grades. Hence, few Congolese received secondary and even fewer higher education. The RC did have a few middle and professional schools and eventually they began Lovanium University, on the outskirts of Leopoldville.

At the outset this university stressed medicine; later it introduced technical courses, and in 1957 a few of its students were in theology.

Protestants were also engaged in education, even before they received government subsidies for their schools. Until 1948 they had to fully fund them. But even after receiving full funding, they had to frequently wait for long periods for government permission to open schools. Unfortunately, Protestants were slower than the RC in recruiting and educating African pastors and church leaders. In 1956 they were reported to have only four theological seminaries, all of them weak. Tribal differences and the distances between mission stations led mission societies to open their own leadership training schools. Consequently, there are a large number of primary local-language and trade-language Bible schools, and a small number of French ones. They often function with slender resources and inadequate staff. Among the larger efforts in leadership training was the opening of the Free University at Kisangani.

A relatively new educational endeavor was the 1985 launching of the Portable Bible Schools movement. It consisted of a two-month intensive training courses for lay leaders and sending them out as church planters to unchurched villages. Protestants were also in the forefront of preparation of Christian literature in vernacular languages as well as the translation of Scripture.

Unlike the Belgian government, Protestants didn't neglect the physical needs of the Congolese. Most of the hospitals and dispensaries were operated by mission societies. In 1959 they operated 186 hospitals, 345 dispensaries, and many leper colonies. The medical workers faced enormous challenges. Because of shortage of staff, missionary doctors were often required to travel many miles to see patients at different treatment centers or hospitals. To facilitate their services, the use of small planes was introduced by several societies.

In 1960 the Missionary Aviation Fellowship [MAF] came to their assistance, transporting personnel to places where their services were needed. One may well ask, "Why the use of airplanes and not surface transportation?" The road conditions in colonial times and now in the DRC are terrible. The breakdown in surface transportation has enhanced the importance of MAF. A one-hour flight replaces two or three weeks of land travel. MAF also helps in locating unreached jungle peoples and supporting missionaries where they could not otherwise survive. The MAF pilots are highly skilled and courageous. Wild primitive terrain, primitive airstrips, and lack of navigational aids make the work treacherous. These pilots and their families need our prayer support.

Without their aircraft, missionary involvement, health programs and lay- training schemes would be seriously limited or even closed down.

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