

Izzy Esler
Upper Arlington High School
Columbus, OH
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Factor 16

Democratic Republic of the Congo: Improving Aid to War Victims

Nestled in the turbulent heart of Africa is the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is a land of diversity and natural beauty, of lushness and bountiful resources. The country lies almost entirely within the equatorial zone, with a climate that is generally hot and humid. Tropical rainforests in the center and west give way to grasslands in the north and south, and to mountains in the east. The Congo boasts the world's fifth longest river, the Congo, and is home to incredibly rare and diverse species of wildlife. It is rich in natural resources such as cobalt, copper, gold and diamonds, making mining one of its bigger industries. It is "a land endowed with vast potential wealth" (CIA). Yet the Congolese live in poverty and chaos, in a country where violence, death and unspeakable violations of human rights are commonplace. There is an urgent and wide-spread need for increased humanitarian and food aid. The ongoing war has immeasurable effects on civil society, the environment, and the population's health. It has cost over 5.4 million lives - more than any conflict since the Second World War (Shannon 10). Other vicious war crimes affect millions more. It gives new meaning to Joseph Conrad's infamous phrase, Africa's "Heart of Darkness."

The last century has been brutal for the Congo. The arrival of Belgian King Leopold II in the early 1900s marked the beginning of its present condition. He enslaved the people and exploited the land, leaving it decimated before he was removed in 1908 ("Congo-Kinshasa"). A respite might have come from the effects of imperialism in 1960 in the form of Patrice Lumumba, the first and only elected prime minister for the next half-century, but he was assassinated and eventually succeeded by Mobutu Seko. Under Mobutu's corrupt regime infrastructure virtually dissolved, violence became commonplace and "the population was fragmented and demoralized" (DeWitte 164).

In the late nineties, the war in Rwanda overflowed into the Congo as one million Hutu refugees fled across the border, which eventually sparked ethnic conflict with the Rwandan-backed Tutsis. Rebel Laurent Kabila ousted Mobutu around this time. His own corruption and politics of pitting rival ethnicities against each other prompted another civil war. This conflict drew in Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia on Kabila's side, and Rwanda and Uganda on the other in an event sometimes known as "Africa's World War." Conflict continues to this day. In 2008, under Kabila's son, Joseph, violence between the Congolese government, various ethnic groups, and the Interahamwe - militants who hid among refugees fleeing into the Congo from Rwanda in 1994 - commenced once more ("Congo-Kinshasa;" Kiley; Shannon 118). Gangs of volatile militias and child soldiers continue to range the country, while violence spills over the borders from unstable neighboring countries, and efforts to restore peace consistently fail. Presently, the UN's Human Development Index ranks the Congo as only 176 out of 182 countries in its development (UNDP).

As a Rwandan saying goes, "The end of logic. That is where the Congo begins" (Shannon 69). It is difficult to obtain an accurate perception of the population, as the disintegrated infrastructure, marauding bands of soldiers, and ineffective government hinder in-depth investigation. However, enough data exist to paint a tragic picture. A third of the population, at least, is undernourished (World Food Programme). In 2009, a UN survey found that at least 500,000 children under 5 years old, and at least one million pregnant women suffer from acute malnutrition ("UN-backed survey"). An average of 1500 people die per day in the Congo because of the war, although only a fraction of the deaths result directly from the violence of war. Most are from disease, hunger or malnutrition caused or exacerbated by the war. Half the deaths have been children younger than five (Shannon 137).

The standard of living in the Congo is low. Eighty percent of Congolese live rurally, and over half live agriculturally. Most families and villages grow much of their own food in small private plots (CIA). A staple in the Congolese diet is *fufu*, a chunky white carbohydrate-paste that does not provide sufficient nutrition (Ziemke). This may be accompanied by various sides when available, such as cassava, rice, potatoes, bananas, yams, beans, corn, fish, peanuts, and various fruits and vegetables. Most Congolese have to purchase perishable food frequently, though sufficient food supplies are often difficult to find or obtain, leading to deficiencies in the diet. Meat is a rare commodity (Ziemke). Family structure in the Congo varies between tribes, by which Congolese often identify themselves as opposed to ethnicity, but generally is oriented around general welfare and strong family values. Enrollment rates for educational institutions are low, and capable teachers are rare, which is the case with most professions in the country (“Congo-Kinshasa”). The country’s literacy rate is 65.5%, one of the world’s lowest. More specifically, there is a gender gap, with men at 76%, and women at 55%. Incomes are low, with an estimated 80% of the population living on less than \$1 a day (CountryWatch). Much of the population operates around the informal street economy, the vendors of which are mainly women (“Congo-Kinshasa”). There are few functioning health centers, and those in existence are not accessible to much of the population, often making international relief organizations the only source of aid. Diseases such as malaria, yellow fever and AIDs are growing epidemics (“Congo-Kinshasa”). Most country databases simply have the unemployment rate as “N/A.” This reflects the lack of functioning roads and the danger of venturing into the country, which hinder surveyors. It is difficult to accurately assess the depth of suffering, much less act to remedy it.

The Congo has been called “the worst place on earth to be a woman” (Shannon 10). Women are considered by many to be lesser citizens. For example, tradition dictates that men eat first at mealtimes, meaning women and children are more likely to become under- or malnourished if there is not enough food to go around (Ziemke). Women are particularly exposed to the violence of war through the barbaric use of rape as a tactic of war. Hundreds of thousands of women have been victimized. The assailants are usually the Interahamwe, notorious for the practice (Kiley). They do not discriminate; women and men, elderly or children are fair game, although most victims are women and girls. The stories of war horrors abound. “Lucienne,” a Congolese woman and beneficiary of the organization Women for Women, recalled her story; “When we got to the bush, they pulled me down to rape me in front of my brother. They gave him the flashlight to hold. As he hid his face in shame, they struck him with a gun and pulled him away to kill him.” She was then held as a sex slave (Women for Women). Another woman tells of being stabbed and gang raped (Shannon 143). Others are subject to genital mutilation, or are forced to watch, or even participate as their family and friends are raped. Women often face social stigmatization after being raped, are treated as criminals rather than victims, and may be abandoned by their husbands out of shame (Women for Women). They are then left to fend for themselves and, usually, their children.

Constant war constitutes the major barrier to improving life in the Congo, which includes agricultural productivity, employment, access to food, education, health care and the creation and maintenance of civil society. Violent conflicts, as a rule, detrimentally affect food availability. Differences in the growth rates of food and other agricultural indicators between times of peace and war are statistically significant (Teodosijević). Except for the relatively few people who live in the major cities, such as the capital Kinshasa, the population is largely unreachable and at the mercy of the violence.

The war-time conditions in the Congo directly hinder access to food. A typical Congolese family living in a rural village might consist of a husband and wife, grandparents, and children – most likely two or three who survived beyond a young age (“Congo-Kinshasa”). They might live in a round, single-room straw or mud hut fringed with banana trees bordering the jungle and their small farm-plot, with rabbits, calves or pigs grazing among the sparse undergrowth (Shannon 142). As is traditional, the mother would be the

primary caretaker of children and home, including obtaining food and other amenities. As the average rural home lacks electricity and water, the mother and any older daughters would need to venture into the woods to collect water or wood for a fire to prepare food, or sometimes just to the garden. There, she and the rest of the family could be subject to torture, rape and murder from raiding militiamen. They are essentially faced with the choice of risking rape, or watching their children starve (Shannon 167). The soldiers might then decide to plunder their small farm, animals, and food, or set it all on fire. The family, if they survived, would then be refugees, without food or any other resources. Many refugees lack the knowledge or resources to rebuild their lives after displacement.

The Congo suffers from significant environmental problems, including deforestation, erosion, destruction from mining, and water pollution (CIA). These are worsened by the war. Soldiers often attack by burning entire villages, and any forest or farmland around them. The displacement of 1.2 million refugees has led to widespread deforestation in areas of resettlement, and thus soil erosion and degraded land (CountryWatch). This, in turn, has hindered the agricultural yield of the land. Rebels and soldiers are responsible for other forms of wanton destruction of the environment in the lawlessness created by war. For instance, in one eastern Congo Park, between the war years of 1998 and 2003, 450 elephants and 130 gorillas were slaughtered by militiamen and poachers (Shannon 110). The Congo basin forest, the second largest in the world, is not only a massive storage of carbon, but a valuable resource for the Congolese in other ways as well (Shannon 110). Its destruction, and the air and water pollution that results disrupts food production, generates less food for the population and deepens starvation and malnourishment. Due to the war, improvements in food and humanitarian relief are desperately needed.

The devastation in the Congo is so complete that the need for the most basic aid pervades most of the country. The war must be ended. Little long term progress can be made on restoring the Congo until peace has been secured. The U.N, fellow African nations, its former colonial ruler, Belgium, the U.S., and the rest of the international community simply must do more to end the conflict. In the meantime, and more immediately, food security and other humanitarian aid must be provided for the smallholders most affected by the perpetual war. Relief centers, capital, education and training are needed to help heal refugees and restore them to self-sustenance.

Major improvements in infrastructure are needed so that relief can physically be delivered. “Failure to accelerate investments in rural infrastructure will make a mockery of efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals in poor developing countries, severely limiting opportunities for these countries to benefit from trade liberalization, international capital markets, and other potential benefits offered by globalization” (Pinstrup-Anderson). Roads, where they exist, are often comparable to “dry riverbeds” (Shannon 77). The Congo River, a traditional lifeline for cities and coastal tribes, deserves special attention. Floating markets carry food, medicine, and other commodities to otherwise unreachable families. The war has made access to the river difficult and travel on it hazardous. Increased UN security and use of barges and other protected flotillas would be an efficient way to reach rural families reliant on the river (Blakely). The channels of commerce must be protected from the Interahamwe and other marauding bands of rebels and soldiers.

A UN-backed survey in 2009 in five Congo provinces revealed that the main causes of malnutrition are “weak access – or lack of access – to healthcare and to drinkable water, poor access of households to good quality food, poor feeding practices of infants, young children and women” (“UN-backed survey”). Displaced rural families often have no access to their farms, and nothing on which to survive. For these people, robbed of their livelihoods and dignity, humanitarian relief and access to necessities such as food and water must be provided. Better coordinated rapid-alert systems would be useful so that food and supplements could be directed to the most people in the greatest need, such as camps of thousands of

refugees that are known to develop after mass-attacks (Shannon 112). Once families have been protected from murder or starvation, then it would be possible to work towards rebuilding self-sustenance. The continued presence of organizations such as the UN, World Food Program, Food for Strength, or World Hunger Relief are essential to saving lives. Such programs should focus on delivering food and water to refugee camps and to threatened villages, either by ground, river barge or airlift, and on establishing more centers so that they are accessible.

Women should receive special attention in the restoration of civil society in the Congo. In the immediate term, they need the most protection. As second-class citizens in the Congo, women are already at a disadvantage. They also bear the greater burden of the violence of war and are more vulnerable to hunger. In addition to the delivery of food, humanitarian relief should focus on establishing health centers, particularly to help female victims of war. There are very few physicians or hospitals in the Congo, especially in rural areas. The only sources for many Congolese, if they have any at all, are traditional healers or international relief organizations (“Congo-Kinshasa”). Again, women are often most in need of modern medical services. For example, traumatic fistula, a rupture between the birth canal and one or more other organs, frequently befalls women due to sexual violence and, if it does not kill them outright, is usually deadly because of resulting infection. Since treatment centers are so scarce, organizations such as WHO or Women For Women should seek to increase their presence so that more women can be saved from this and many other afflictions.

Focusing on women might also hold the key to repairing family and communal life. Women play an important cultural role in the Congo as, traditionally, it is the women who are the primary workers in agriculture and small-scale trading, in addition to caring for children (CountryWatch). Moreover, the World Bank reports that “women reinvest 90% of their income in their families and communities, compared with men who reinvest 30% to 40%” (Women for Women). Based on these traits, it would seem that women are the linchpin to improving food security for rural Congolese families. Organizations such as Women for Women, which not only provides direct food and medical aid to women but also a means to re-establish self-sustenance through agriculture or commerce, are particularly valuable in rebuilding the Congo, and should be far more prevalent. Only recently have many relief organizations set foot in the Congo, and for the severity of the situation, it is important that their efforts be supported and continued.

Beyond direct food and medical aid, humanitarian organizations should focus further on basic dietary and agricultural education. A participant in Woman for Woman said, “My children were suffering from malnutrition, but since I began receiving training and learned about the three types of food that need to be part of good nutrition, my life has changed and my children are healthy” (Women for Women). She is representative of much of the population. Education rates, knowledge of efficient farming practices and proper nutrition, and understanding agricultural technologies are low. Training seminars or clinics on health and agriculture will be necessary for the population to gain greater stability.

Food shortages in the Congo are complicated by a number of other phenomena, such as regular droughts in the south and subsequent irregular crop production and livestock shortages. Agricultural technologies are minimal, and food prices are rising (World Food Prize; Countrywatch). Improvements in agricultural practices in the Congo would surely help to lift many rural Congolese from starvation and poverty, as “a number of studies have found a positive correlation between agricultural growth and poverty alleviation” (Pinstrip-Anderson). Improving humanitarian relief and food aid to displaced war victims would put more rural Congolese in a position to accept agricultural education and to start sustaining themselves. However, even modest progress will be tenuous and at risk of being undone as long as the war and violence continue.

If some semblance of peace can be established in the Congo, then opportunities to rebuild the country can arise. With security, displaced smallholder families could begin to rebuild their lives, agriculture would become sustainable and diets could improve. But the perpetual violence makes that difficult, if not impossible. It is vital that the international community remain involved in the conflict that is uncontrolled by an inefficient government. Restoration of peace and reconciliation of antagonism between the Congo and Rwanda depends largely on the disbanding of the Interahamwe (Kiley). The conflict in the Congo has pulled many other nations into the turmoil, proving it to be an international issue. The UN, then, by its own charter to maintain international peace and security, has a very real purpose in acting there. Indeed, with a budget of over \$1 billion and 17,000 troops, the UN mission in the Congo is presently the largest in the world, yet it is still undermanned (Kiley). Any world powers that claim themselves proprietors of human rights, such as the US, should take an interest. Belgium, too, holds a moral obligation to restore peace given its role in shaping the Congo into what it is today. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has already visited the Congo in her campaign for human rights, which is a promising sign (Kiley). Pressure should be put on the Congolese to pursue rapes and other war crimes, instead of letting them become 'normal.' It will take influential powers to pressure the corrupt Congolese government into peaceful negotiations with rival powers, to coordinate realistic means of diffusing the ethnic tensions and to begin physically rebuilding the country. Many of the Congolese, especially the rural poor, simply do not have the security, education, or resources to make progress toward a better life.

The conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo has been long and unrelenting. Its origins go back to the beginning of the last century with the implementation of a brutal colonial regime, and stretch to the present, with devastating civil wars under corrupt governments. Some of the most heinous crimes against humanity are being committed in the Congo. Millions have been murdered or displaced, millions more stricken by health risks, hunger and malnutrition. Rural dwellers who are overwhelmingly poor comprise the majority of the population, and are most affected by the violence. Improved humanitarian relief and food aid is needed by these refugees as a matter of survival. This should take the form of direct food aid to assist those who have lost everything in the violence. Relief should focus on women, who are most at risk in the country, and are essential to the rejuvenation of the Congo's economic and civil well-being. To coordinate these efforts, improvements in infrastructure should be made in order to deliver the goods. In order for all of these initiatives to be a success, and to be long lasting, it will take influence at the international level on the corrupt Congolese government to facilitate peace and reform its ways. The vicious war in the Congo has persisted for years with little sign of abating. Major and permanent solutions to the problems of life in the Congo cannot be made until it is brought to an end.

On a more personal note, after researching the Congo and reading Lisa Shannon's A Thousand Sisters, I was moved to take action in my own small way. Recently, I joined Women for Women and became a sponsor. For only two weeks' worth of a part-time job's salary, I will be helping a Congolese woman have access to food, medical care and capital for an entire year.

Works Cited

- Blakely, Jonathan. "River Of Life -- Congo Odyssey: A Trip Down 'Congo's Grand Boulevard.'" *NPR*. PBS, 30 Aug. 2010. Web. 6 Sept. 2010. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129176374>>.
- CIA. "Congo, Democratic Republic of the." *The World Factbook*. Central Intelligence Agency, 19 Aug. 2010. Web. 25 Aug. 2010. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cg.html> >.
- "Congo-Kinshasa." *CultureGrams Online Edition*. ProQuest, 2010. Web. 3 Sept. 2010. <http://online.culturegrams.com/world/world_country.php?contid=1&wmn=Africa&cid=37&cn=Congo-Kinshasa>.
- CountryWatch. "Congo (DRC)." *CountryWatch*. CountryWatch, 2010. Web. 7 Sept. 2010. <http://countrywatch.com/cw_topic.aspx?type=text&vcountry=40&topic=POHRT>.
- DeWitte, Ludo. *The Assassination of Lumumba*. New York: Library of Congress, 2001. Print.
- Kiley, Sam. "UN takes on Interahamwe Hutu militia in Congo amid surge in rape." *The Times Online*. The Times, 8 Aug. 2010. Web. 2 Sept. 2010. <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/africa/article6788132.ece>>.
- Pinstrup-Anderson, Per, and Satoru Shimokawa. "Rural Infrastructure and Agricultural Development." *World Bank*. World Bank, May 2006. Web. 1 Sept. 2010. <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTDECABCTOK2006/Resources/Per_Pinstrup_Andersen_Rural_Infrastructure.pdf>.
- Shannon, Lisa. *A Thousand Sisters*. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010. Print.
- Teodosijević, Slobodanka B. "Armed Conflicts and Food Security." *Economic and Social Development Department*. Food and Agricultural Department of the United Nations, June 2003. Web. 21 Aug. 2010. <<ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/007/ae044e/ae044e00.pdf>>.
- "UN-backed survey finds alarming malnutrition rates in DR Congo." *UN News Centre*. United Nations, 7 Apr. 2010. Web. 7 Sept. 2010. <<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=34297&Cr=democratic&Cr1=congo>>.
- UNDP. "Congo, The Democratic Republic of." *Human Development Report 2009*. United Nations, 2009. Web. 1 Sept. 2010. <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_COD.html>.
- Women for Women. "Stories from Women, What We Do." *Women for Women*. Women for Women International, 2010. Web. 3 Sept. 2010. <<http://www.womenforwomen.org/>>.
- World Food Programme. "Congo, Democratic Republic of." *World Food Programme*. World Food Programme, 2010. Web. 20 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.wfp.org/countries/congo-democratic-republic>>.
- Ziemke, Jennifer J. "Democratic Republic of the Congo." *Countries and their Cultures*. Advameg, Inc., 2010. Web. 3 Sept. 2010. <<http://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo.html>>.