

FOCUS ON

The Democratic Republic of the CONGO

Many countries are known for their troubled histories, but arguably none matches Congo for its history of horror. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo), called Zaire from 1971 to 1977, lies in central Africa. It is sometimes called Congo-Kinshasa, after its capital, to distinguish it from the Republic of Congo, or Congo-Brazzaville. In a population of 56 million, as many as 250 ethnic groups have been distinguished and named. The linguistic variety is bridged by the use of French and Swahili. Some 44 percent of the people are classified as Roman Catholic and 36 percent as Protestant (mostly nominal). The rest of the population is made up of a small percentage of Muslims and those adhering to either traditional religions or syncretic sects that merge Christianity with traditional beliefs and rituals.

DR Congo, about one-fourth the size of the United States of America, is abundantly blessed with rivers, rainforest, agricultural potential, and vast energy and mineral resources, including oil, copper, diamonds, and even uranium. It could be Africa's richest nation

were it not torn to shreds and reduced to poverty by corrupt dictators, greedy plunderers, and the ravages of war.

History

In the last one hundred and twenty years, unremitting horrors have condemned untold millions of people to lives of misery and led to the deaths of many more. Portuguese slave traders inflicted horror on the Congo's population early in the sixteenth century (just as Zanzibari Arabs did later in the nineteenth century). The explorer Henry Morton Stanley mapped out the area in the late 1800s. He wrote popular books about his travels which raised interest in the region. Congo was given to King Leopold II of Belgium in the Conference of Berlin in 1885. He made the land

his private property and named it Congo Free State.

Leopold's professed aim was to protect the natives from Arab slavers and to open the heart of Africa to Christian missionaries and Western capitalists. However, the king

unleashed unimaginable horrors on the people. He turned his Congo Free State into a massive labour camp. The local population was brutalized in the relentless search for rubber, a growing market with the development of rubber tyres.



Leopold became one of the richest men in the world. Between 1885 and 1908 around ten million Congolese (half the population) were killed by the mercenaries working for the Belgian king. They were actually paid for the number of right hands they collected from Africans who had not produced the amount of rubber demanded of them. The hands were to prove to the mercenaries' superiors that they had not been wasting their bullets on animals! Protests reached such a peak in 1908, that the Belgian parliament bowed to international pressure and forcibly took control from the king and adopted the Free State as a Belgian colony.

Belgian rule saw the development of modern cities, railroad and highway transport, airports, schools, and an extensive healthcare system. The colony gained its independence in 1960, but with independence came internal wars. Mobutu seized power in 1965. He, like King Leopold before him, made himself one of the richest men in the world while the country's economy collapsed, democracy vanished, and most people went hungry. In 1984 Mobutu was said to have four billion dollars stashed away in personal Swiss bank accounts.

In the 1990s Western relations with Mobutu cooled as he was no longer deemed a necessary Cold War ally. His government was toppled in a rebellion led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila in May 1997 and supported by troops from Uganda and Rwanda. Kabila was assassinated early in 2001 and was succeeded by his twenty-nine-year-old son.

Since 1997 the armies of no fewer than nine African nations have fought in the country. During five years of conflict an estimated three to four million people have died from massacre, famine, and disease. The economy lies in ruins, but former rebels have now joined a power-sharing government. General elections are planned for 2005.

Religion

Older readers may well remember stories from Congo at the time of the Simba uprising in the 1960s. The Simba (Swahili word for "lion") revolt began as a reaction to government misrule, but quickly spread. By 1964 the Simba rebels controlled almost half of the Congo.

Some of us have heard missionaries recount their experiences during the Simba rebellion. Others have read books on the subject. To have done either is to be astounded by the suffering they endured, the courage they exhibited, and the comfort of the Lord they experienced. Notable amongst many such missionaries are Bob and Alma McAllister from Northern Ireland. Twelve hundred believers from the area of their mission were murdered along with some missionaries. Bob himself was actually lined up to be shot. His colleague, a father of six, was shot dead, while Bob, though shot at, survived. (An account of his experiences can be heard on www.sermonaudio.com.)

Much has been written about medical doctor Helen Roosevelt. Because she was a doctor, she had been spared,

although not without coming through many serious incidents. Someone had tried to poison her, but her dog ate the meal intended for her and died. Helen was well aware of her danger. Many mission women had been raped by the marauding rebel armies. She stayed on, believing that "If Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him." That was her mission's motto. She reasoned that if an earlier generation of missionaries to Africa had died of malaria and other jungle diseases for the sake of God and His glory, then God might well demand a different kind of sacrifice of her as He already had of other women missionaries. Although violated and humiliated by the rebels, Helen found that God gave her an even deeper love for the Congo people. She later returned to continue her medical mission work.

Free Presbyterian Connections

In the Martyrs Memorial Free Presbyterian Church in Belfast, alongside the busts of famous Reformers, there is one erected to the memory of Dennis Parry. A plaque contains the following words, "Missionary and Martyr. Fellow student with Dr. Paisley at what is now South Wales Bible College. Went to Congo under Unevangelised Fields Mission. Great passion for souls. Wife Nora was a missionary nurse. Martyred with wife and two children, Andrew and Grace, by Simba rebels. Survived by two older children." The two surviving children were in England for education. During

the months of captivity prior to their deaths ten-year-old Grace constantly sang, "Burdens are lifted at Calvary." She was singing it when she was shot along with her brother and parents. Their bodies were dumped into the river.

Just as the Simba rebellion was ending, the late Rev. Hillis Fleming (former Free Presbyterian minister in Liverpool) and his wife, June, arrived in Congo. They worked faithfully in an isolated area that could be reached only by a riverboat and dugout canoe. June, a nurse, was the only medical help in a vast area and had the joy of saving many lives.

DR Congo is a tragedy the developed world has done its best to ignore. The economy is in ruins. Some missionaries have been forced to evacuate three times in the past decade to take up temporary residence in neighbouring countries due to war and civil strife. To their credit, Congolese Christians haven't allowed a civil war to curtail outreach and church-planting.

We must not ignore this country as many have. May the sacrifices missionaries and national believers have made in the past spur us on to pray that God would bless the country through the preaching of the gospel. ■

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