



Congo-Kinshasa: Lifting a Nation From Its 'Heart of Darkness'

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28 November 2008

GUEST COLUMN

*The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) will not lift itself out of its “heart of darkness” until it addresses the human rights violations of its brutal past, writes **Olivier Kambala wa Kambala**, a Congolese human rights lawyer and co-founder of a new initiative, the Congo Memory Institute.*

This month marks the centenary of the Kingdom of Belgium’s annexation of the “Congo Free State,” a territory which had previously been King Leopold II’s personal fiefdom. Belgium was forced to take over the territory in 1908 after an outcry over Leopold’s rule, but neither its colonization of the country nor the rule of Congolese leaders since independence in 1960 has brought much improvement to the lives of the country’s citizens.

It was after subtle diplomatic maneuvers that Leopold, sovereign of a tiny European country, was given control at the Berlin Conference in 1885 of more than 905,000 square miles of Africa. Leopold based his claim on philanthropic and humanitarian pledges but they were quickly belied by his agents’ ruthless exploitation of ivory, rubber and other raw material.

Leopold meant business. Leading up to the Berlin Conference, he wrote to his ambassador in London: “I do not want to miss the opportunity of our obtaining a share in this magnificent cake.” Mocking his own noble promises, Leopold transformed the territory into a “place of physical and spiritual horror” – in the words of journalist Richard Dowden –where predatory practices prevailed, supported by implacable Belgian and other European administrators and officers who commanded an army called the “Force Publique.”

The force used unprecedented violence to compel the native Congolese to collect timber, rubber, ivory and other minerals: women and children were abducted and raped, those who still did not comply had their hands cut off, and an estimated 10 million people died. The British author Arthur Conan Doyle described the oppression as a crime against humanity, and Joseph Conrad said the Congo under Leopold’s rule was the “Heart of Darkness.” For his part, Leopold grew rich and built palaces and other “oeuvres de grandeur” in his kingdom; in Belgium today he is still nicknamed the “empire-building king.”

Leopold’s legacy still haunts the former colony. Ruled by successive tyrants, first Belgian, then Congolese, it was re-baptized Zaire by Mobutu Seso Seko in 1971, and then the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) by Laurent Desiré Kabila in 1997.

The atrocities continue into the modern era: women have been raped on a massive scale, with sexual abuse happening just as it occurred in 1888 – except now the victims are liable to contract HIV and Aids. In 1999, women were buried alive in Makobola in South Kivu province. Children have been enlisted into armed forces and civilians have had their property looted and become

the pawns of armed groups. Natural resources are exploited illegally, supporting yet more atrocities.

Between 1998 and 2007, an estimated five million people died as a result of conflict, and in the past few months 250,000 have been driven from their homes by fighting between the national army and forces loyal to the rebel general, Laurent Nkunda.

Leopold's Force Publique was a mercenary force composed of those tribes seen by the Belgians as the most fearsome warriors, led by Belgian and other European officers. The constellations of armies and rebels in 2008 are the same. Local groups fight against, and with, foreign armies from neighboring countries, sometimes with the aid of mercenaries.

In 1888, the explorer Henry Morton Stanley fought against natives at Nyankunde in the Ituri District, decimating dozens with firearms. Over a century later in 2003, in the same area, Lendu and Hema militias fought an ethnic war, killing thousands and leading to the first war crimes trial before the International Criminal Court in The Hague. The eastern DRC is as troubled today as it was in 1890 when the Force Publique battled slave raiders and nicknamed the area "Zone arabe".

Decolonization has not rid the state of its predatory approach towards its long-suffering population. The patterns of abuse by appointed and, recently, elected representatives of the central government are abominably similar to the way they were during the years of the Congo Free State.

Attempts have been made by governments down the years to tackle human rights violations. Leopold II was the first to establish a commission to investigate allegations raised by a group of concerned Europeans calling themselves the Congo Reform Association. It reported nothing. Nor did the Kingdom of Belgium bother to respond to allegations of atrocities during Leopold's reign.

Nor, after independence, did the administration of Joseph Kasa-Vubu and Patrice Lumumba tackle the crimes of the Belgian colonizers (though they had little chance before Mobutu's coup). Mobutu fashioned his own kleptocratic regime that embezzled the people's wealth to reward mediocrity. But even he was eventually forced to organize a national sovereign conference, including a comprehensive accounting of human rights violations under his regime. The report's findings were never made public.

After Mobutu's downfall, Laurent Kabila also talked about a process of bringing about reconciliation, to be run by Protestant bishops, without establishing the facts of the abuses that were to be forgiven.

In the latest installment of these attempts to address the past, the power-sharing agreement of 2002 created a truth and reconciliation commission. But its zeal for conflict mediation – on top of its composition and mandate – clouded the search for truth, leaving Congolese victims without credible channels for redress. While a handful of Congolese are facing trial before domestic and international courts, these initiatives have not deterred new abuses, as the ongoing fighting in North-Kivu demonstrates.

Why has regime after regime perpetuated this violence against the people? Why have they failed to provide even the most basic protection to their citizens?

The lack of any attempt to deal with memory seems to be the missing link – the key reason the Congolese have failed to ensure that crimes and abuses similar to those of 1888 and later do not occur again. The absence of initiatives to keep alive the memory of colonial, post-colonial and even pre-colonial atrocities and abuses is appalling. The DRC has no credible archival institutions. You could learn more about the Congo by visiting the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Brussels than any place within the country.

The form of Congo's never-ending drama of violence will remain unchanged until serious work on memories of the past is conducted, supplemented by other multi-faceted interventions crafted to lift the country out of its past. Hence the formation of the Congo Memory Institute.

Through archives, forums and dialogue about memory, the institute will strive to respond to the needs of the people of the Congo, who are fast becoming disillusioned about quick fixes. If memory is not preserved, and if we fail to overturn the aphorism that "the only thing we learn from the past is that we do not learn from the past," the prospects of dealing adequately with it will remain poor. By recovering memory, and thus learning from the past, we can lift the Congo out of its heart of darkness.

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