



Congo Memory Institute

PRESS RELEASE

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100 years after the annexation of King Leopold's Congo (1) sees the launch of a new initiative dedicated to giving a voice to millions suffering a ceaseless century of conflict

An ambitious new organisation, the Congo Memory Institute (CMI), launches today on the centenary of the Belgian government's annexation of King Leopold II's Congo Free State. Olivier Kambala (2), Coordinator of CMI, says "the DRC has never escaped King Leopold's colonial system of resource exploitation premised on violence against the local people." The Congolese human rights lawyer believes that, "by failing to document past and current failures and abuses the challenge of building a society that empowers and humanizes its people becomes that much more difficult to realise and leaves thousand, if not millions, without redress."

The current crisis in North Kivu, with tens of thousands of displaced people, continues an unbroken century of conflict and exploitation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The last decade of civil wars from 1998 to 2007 had a devastating human cost of 5.4 million dead. Historians, including Adam Hochschild, CMI board member and author of *King Leopold's Ghost* (3), has estimated the human cost of King Leopold's reign at a staggering 10 million lives. Despite regular violence, no comprehensive or successful efforts have been made to address the past.

Notions of trust and accountability have been completely depleted and abuses continue uninterrupted. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, guided by Deputy-chairperson and CMI board member Alex Boraine (4), has proven the importance of dealing with memories of past atrocities. Peace and security in the DRC has little chance of success without a full examination and preservation of historical memories of past atrocities

By conducting extensive research shared through an online database open to the public and encouraging open debate and sharing of memories, the CMI will help foster a collective memory to empower communities across the DRC. It provides a forum to deepen the understanding of structural and organizational settings of governance, the security sector, the justice system and other political institutions, and will engage relevant stakeholders with an aim of halting the destructive cycle set off by King Leopold.

If the DRC fails to confront its past, it risks a fourth predatory regime moulded on past patterns of dehumanization and abuses. “What we aim to do has been a missing ingredient in national and international efforts to curb the calamity faced by DRC for many years,” Olivier Kambala notes. “We are very excited to take this forward and to work with others to provide a comprehensive approach to conflict resolution and long lasting peace and security.”

Notes to editors:

(1) Congo refers to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

(2) Olivier is a Congolese human rights lawyer who has worked in the struggle against impunity in the DRC and is currently the Burundi Country-Lead for the International Center for Transitional Justice. He was formerly Director for the International Center for Peace in Central Africa. Prior to joining the ICTJ, Olivier worked as a campaigner for the UK-based Global Witness and as a Programme Officer with the Belgian NGO RCN-Justice et Démocratie. Olivier co-founded the CMI with Alice Blondel, the former Senior Manager of Tactics at Global Witness heading campaigns on the DRC and Liberia, and Coel Kirkby, a doctoral candidate at Cambridge University who has written and consulted on the DRC and related African legal affairs.

(3) (<http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/catalog/authordetail.cfm?authorID=2188>)

(4) (<http://www.ictj.org/en/about/directors/135.html>)

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