

A Short History of the Congo (Democratic Republic- DRC)

Along with most of the rest of Africa, Congo lost a huge number of its strongest and best people to the slave trade – which largely laid the foundations of the USA economy. In a sense the continent never fully recovered from that loss.

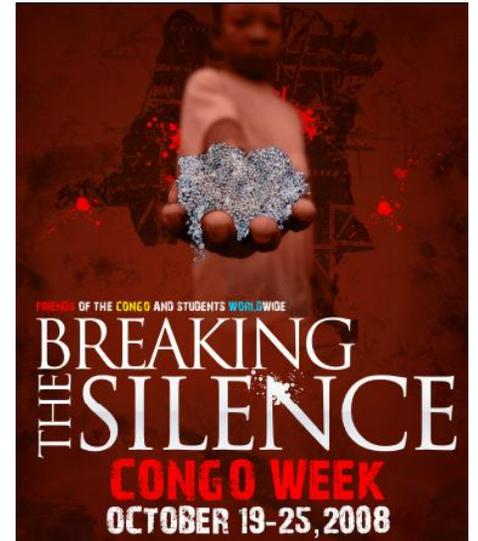
Then the European powers carved Africa up into colonies and extracted its resources for their own use – the basis of the industrial revolution and by extension of our economy. Congo became the fiefdom of Belgium's King Leopold and then Belgian's colony. The resources it took were rubber, palm oil and minerals (mainly copper and gold).

In the 1950s and 60s most African countries achieved independence. Many of them had previously had some form of self-government, so were used to elections and being governed by their own people. Most of them had well-educated people – university graduates in all the fields needed to run a country.

Congo had none of these things. There had never been an election until a few months before independence, when local body elections were held. In its whole history it had less than 30 university graduates and most of them were priests trained by the Catholic Church. Belgium had said it would never grant independence to Congo, but international pressures and the fact most other countries in Africa were becoming independent meant it could not resist the trend. So in a matter of months from the beginning of 1960 it arranged for 'independence', which occurred on June 30 that year, though some Belgians said openly they would retain control of the economy.

The Belgians had a large army and police force with which to control the vast country, the size of the whole of Western Europe, but Congolese were only privates and constables. Apart from a handful of NCOs in the army there were no local trained officers. Came independence and the soldiers and policemen objected to still being under the orders of 'foreigners' and a revolt broke out which led to years of strife and instability. To compound this, on the political scene, with no experience of 'democracy' people were often not willing to accept the apparent results of elections. The Belgians had divided the country into provinces along tribal lines, the better to control it, and elections on a national basis were subject to rampant tribalism, leading to further instability.

This in turn caused what was virtually a military coup d'état, with Sergeant, soon to name himself General Mobutu, becoming President, though there was still a more-or-less functioning Parliament with a Prime Minister. Over more than two decades, with the support of the USA and the World Bank, Mobutu plundered the country for his own benefit, plunging it further and further into debt, with no real economic growth. The growing poverty of the people led to many taking matters into their own hands to survive. Nowhere was this more so than in the rich mining areas where people began to help themselves to whatever they could get hold of – and this led to protracted wars where other African countries got involved by sending troops, ostensibly to back the Government, but believing they could also plunder some of the wealth for themselves. And in spite of the United Nations imposing elections in 2006 and the presence of a UN 'peace-keeping' force, the strife continues to this day.





IRIN: A displaced persons camp in DRC

Nearly six million people have died as a result of conflict and conflict related causes in the Congo since 1996. Forty-five thousand continue to die each month. Hundreds of thousands of women have been raped as weapon of war.

What is at stake again is the mineral wealth, particularly in Kivu Province which is the north-eastern part of the country bordering Rwanda and Uganda. Gold is the main object of mining operations - mostly not extracted in the usual way by mining companies with machinery and trained operatives, but by young men, boys really, working by hand to pan for the precious metal. They sell it to middle men at low prices and then it is smuggled out of the country by others who take the biggest cut.

A few years ago another mineral, Columbite/tantalite or Coltan for short was discovered in the area. This coincided with the invention of 'mobile' phones, now more commonly known as cell phones. Coltan is the one vital element without which they (and laptop computers) cannot function. Congo has 70% of the world's deposits of coltan (Sierra Leone, which also endured years of warfare, has the rest) and this is why the continued killing, rape and pillaging by various militias - some of them groups which fled into Congo after causing the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 - break-away elements of the National Army and even the Army itself, carries on. The government which resulted from the 2006 elections does not control the whole country - it does not have the means, and the economy is so weak there is little chance of change in that direction without massive aid - restitution one might say - and the means to really govern the whole territory.

At first sight it is difficult to understand why this situation is largely unreported and why very little has been done by the international community to put an end to it. The answer lies to a great degree in the powerful multi-national companies which benefit from the illicit trade in minerals and especially in coltan. The unbelievable explosion of the mobile phone industry around the globe could not be happening without the suffering and loss of the Congolese people. Everyone needs to reflect on that.

*Althea Campbell
Information Secretary, Christian World Service
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