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Hungry for Peace: Relieving Food Insecurity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo through Improved Diplomacy

At first glance, the Democratic Republic of the Congo seems close to paradise. It has lush rainforests, a vast wealth of minerals, the great Congo River, and incredible agricultural potential. This third largest African country abounds with diamonds, oil, uranium, gold, cobalt, and copper. It has plentiful water and fertile soil for growing cassava, corn, coffee, plantains, rice, beans, and sweet potatoes.

In reality, however, the Congo is more like paradise lost. Corruption, greed, violence, and horrific hunger mar this nation of 69 million. The recent, brutal Congo wars, which have been described as the deadliest since World War II, have caused the deaths of nearly 5 million Congolese. Most of these deaths were from sicknesses and malnutrition that could easily have been prevented in times of peace. Two million people have been displaced from their homes. Thirty-three thousand children are forced to serve in the military, and four million are orphans. Hostile rebel soldiers massacre villages and loot crops. The eastern part of the country is called the rape capital of the world. In addition to these nightmarish statistics, 72% of the Congolese are malnourished and not even one half of the population has safe drinking water. The education scene is also struggling—nearly half of school-age children are not in school, and less than one percent of the Congolese attend college.

Even in these horrible conditions, family remains central to the Congolese people. A typical family includes extended relations living under one roof, and women generally have five to ten children. While the rich Congolese live in well-kept houses and drive automobiles, the poor Congolese live in shantytowns or other rickety dwellings in rural areas. The average annual income is equivalent to about \$300 US dollars.

Most Congolese make their living off the land, though the presence of violent rebels has forced farmers to abandon their fields. This translates to less food for others or for export. And even if there were crops to sell, the country's frayed infrastructure and unreliable economy has resulted in other countries discontinuing their trade with the Congo. In fact, the World Bank's *Doing Business 2010* report ranks the Democratic Republic of the Congo as 182nd out of 183 countries in regard to trade.

In order for food security to return to the Congo, there must first be peace. But peace is impossible until the Congo Wars and the country's political history are understood. Though much of the Congo's instability is caused by fighting among the country's nearly 250 different ethnic groups, the problem runs much broader and deeper. It is a complicated mix of greed and power struggles both within the Congo and among various foreign nations.

Indeed, the country's history is filled with mismanagement. In 1960, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then called Zaire) gained independence from Belgium after 75 years of Colonial rule that plundered the country's natural resources. Patrice Lumumba was appointed prime minister, and Joseph Kasavubu was president. Unfortunately, neither of these men was experienced in government and the new country had no economic policies in place. Lumumba was overthrown in 1965 by Joseph Mobutu who gained power with both internal backing and support from foreign countries who desired affordable access to the nation's rich resources and transportation routes. Mobutu served as a dictator for approximately 30 years, but his leadership

was cruel and corrupt. He publicly hung opponents, personally pocketed tremendous wealth from the country's natural resources, and held elections where he was the only choice.

Mobutu was finally overthrown after the Rwandan genocide, a horrific event often blamed solely on the tense relations between the Tutsis and Hutus, two ethnic groups struggling for power. In 1994, the Hutus killed more than 500,000 Tutsis in Rwanda. But when the Tutsis seized control of the government, 1.2 million Rwandan Hutus fled into the Democratic Republic of the Congo to escape retaliation. They settled down in the eastern part of the country where they went on to harm and kill both Rwandan and Congolese Tutsis.

Mobutu turned a blind eye to these events and even asked the native Tutsis to leave the area. The Tutsis rebelled and joined with Laurent Kabila and his mostly Tutsi army, the ADFLC (Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire.) Rwanda, Uganda, Angola, Zambia, and several other countries backed this rebellion, causing Mobutu to abandon the country and Kabila to become president in 1997. Kabila's relations with Rwanda soon soured. Several new Rwandan troops poured into the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but Kabila's remaining foreign allies helped him force the rebels into the eastern side of the country.

During this period of time, the Congo was constantly in conflict. In addition to internal struggles for power, several insurgency groups were using the Congo as a base for attacking neighboring countries. At one point 7 countries were entangled in the war, and many small groups continued to raid, loot, and harm the Congolese villages.

In 2001, Kabila was assassinated, and his son Joseph Kabila succeeded him. A year later, the Sun City Agreement was signed, stating that all previously hostile ethnic groups would fully integrate into the Democratic Republic of the Congo army. It also required President Joseph Kabila to share the power with four vice presidents from different groups. While the leaders agreed to these conditions and officially withdrew all troops, several illegal militias remained behind long after their countries had left—and the violence continued.

Meanwhile, the Congolese government attempted to integrate the national army to encourage once-hostile forces to work together. Resistance was strong, particularly from Laurent Nkunda, a Congolese Tutsi whose considerable army of followers terrorized the Congolese people with extremely violent tactics.

Recently, there has been a mixture of positive and negative change in the Congo. Nkunda was arrested in January 2009, and many of his men have agreed to join forces with the government. The Congo and Rwanda have also allegedly joined forces to eliminate the various rampant militias—although reports have shown that both governments have secretly been offering assistance to certain militias instead of eliminating them.

This instability and chaos make it impossible to secure food, especially since soldiers often take crops and the country's infrastructure is crumbled. In order for there to be food security, the many warring forces in the Republic of Congo must come to a lasting agreement. This resolution must be clear and decisive, something that benefits all parties involved and cannot easily be broken.

How is this possible?

Sadly there is no one solution or quick fix. But steps can be taken to improve the lives and the food security of the Congolese. Those steps are (1) Raise awareness of the Congo wars, (2) screen and strengthen the army, (3) provide military, humanitarian, and developmental assistance, and (4) hold involved governments accountable.

First, there must be raised awareness of the Congo wars, because few realize the horrifying facts and the ways the Congolese people and their resources are exploited today. Those who do know should make it their mission to accurately relate the facts to their friends and family. Western journalists can raise awareness by well-written articles and TV reports. If the world were alerted to these facts, most likely that awareness would result in a demand for action. This would put more pressure on political authorities—particularly the Congolese government—to find more lasting solutions to help stop the violence.

Awareness may increase the amount of donations and the number of volunteers willing to help victims of the Congo wars as well. The Congolese government and UN Peacekeepers should help protect organized volunteer efforts bringing food to the malnourished of the Congo, setting up refuges for the displaced, and giving medical and emotional care to victims of abuse.

Second, the army must continue its efforts to integrate. The military must ensure that all recruits are over the age of eighteen, have no criminal background, and have no militia involvement. This screening absolutely must be enforced—any military officer who is lax in screening must immediately lose his position in the army. To confirm that this does happen, the UN should oversee the process.

Furthermore, all child soldiers or soldiers recruited while they were children should be allowed to leave the army with compensation for their service. The Congolese government must also rid the army of the following: those who recruited child soldiers, those guilty of rape, those guilty of violence within the army (when not related to self-defense), those guilty of unjustified violence towards civilians, those guilty of looting villages, and those guilty of any other unreasonable action towards the Congolese people. The UN should also screen this process.

Third, the Democratic Republic of the Congo should request assistance. The country's army has been weakened by the steady onslaught of rebel groups, especially by Nkunda's group. Because of this, the army may be too weak to secure the country's borders and to carry out the necessary steps to restoring peace. Therefore, it makes sense for them to ask for more assistance from the UN Peacekeepers for a period of three years. In addition, the Democratic Republic of the Congo could ask modern powers such as England, France, and the US for temporary military assistance and guidance.

Those countries willing to help should devote their energy to ridding the Congo of the militias remaining in the forest. They should intermix with the Congolese army—sending a group of mixed troops (containing half-Congolese troops and half-assistance troops.) This will prevent the Congolese troops from committing any acts of violence or sexual abuse because the presence of the assisting troops will hold them accountable. Also, the combined forces will be better suited to fend off any militias that may come to prey on the villagers.

The Congo should also request assistance from international organizations willing to partner to bring food, medicine, and housing to the country. Groups such as the World Food Program and the Peace Corps are just two possibilities. And the government should look to willing organizations and other governments to provide guidance in rebuilding the country's infrastructure and developing the Congo's trade and economic system.

The last, and perhaps the most important concept for the Congolese to integrate into their government, is a system of accountability. Many officials continue to support the war for their own advantage—hoping to exploit the Congo's natural resources for their own gain. Neighboring Rwanda and Uganda have exploited the Congo's water, diamonds, coltan, cassiterite, tin, copper, and timber. Other countries, organizations, and large companies around the world are also taking

advantage of the wars. In fact, the UN released a 2003 report detailing about 125 companies and individuals fueling the war for commercial gain and lucrative contracts. Ideally, the UN and other watchdog organizations can continue to shed a spotlight on such greed.

The Congolese government has been stained by corruption and individual political agendas. When the exploitation of its natural resources is also considered, accountability becomes a necessity. The United Nations should have Joseph Kabila (president of the Congo), the head of the Congolese army, and head government officials of Uganda and Rwanda give annual progress reports to ensure that advances are made. Uganda and Rwanda should help arrest rebel militias and then withdraw from the Congo, unless specifically asked otherwise. Joseph Kabila must direct resources to stop black market trade and to make progress towards rebuilding villages so displaced people can return safely home. The army general should ensure that all the aforementioned steps involving the military are carried out. If the United Nations holds these men responsible and makes them write periodical reports on their progress, they are likely to strive for their goals. If they are left to their own devices, they may not put as much emphasis and focus towards achieving these ideals.

With peace comes security, and with security comes many benefits. Some of these improvements include steady farming, clean drinking water, better health, increased education rates, higher employment, and a secure food supply. Then the Congolese can use their rich natural resources in a land of peace—a land finally fit to be called paradise.

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