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Democratic Republic of Congo: Looking Past a Terrible Past

Introduction:

“If you can’t feed a hundred people, then just feed one.” This statement by Mother Theresa really has an impact on how saving just one life means everything in the world. In America, we don’t realize just how tough some peoples’ lives are. We have food, clothing, and shelter available nearly every minute we live. Not only do we have these necessities, but we also have luxuries that people from third-world countries have never even dreamed of. Americans have access to first-class education, next-to unlimited access to technology, and countless forms of entertainment. We’ve all heard about the impact hunger has on people around the world, but do we ever stop to think about more than just the people in our school, community, or country? Maybe in America we don’t all have the means to feed an entire country, but if each of us could feed just one starving child, one dying adult, one suffering human being, think of the difference we could make.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, the estimated world population is to exceed 9 billion people by the year 2050 (International Macroeconomic). That’s more than farmers have ever had to feed, and they will likely have less land to do it on. Which makes it that much more important for every person in our fortunate country to step up and continue the fight against world hunger. Many people don’t realize that every five seconds, a child dies of hunger. In 45 minutes, that would be the equivalent to wiping out my entire high school. That is a horrible truth that makes me feel guilty when I come home to a great meal every night. Of course, we need to get people past feeling guilty. We need to make Americans take a step towards helping those who live in poverty, who face hunger and death on a daily basis.

Currently, Africa has many of the most impoverished countries on the earth. The reasons for this include uneducated citizens, disease, war, and the inability to escape all of these. Even with constant mission trips, food, and financial aid, these countries struggle to keep their people alive. The Democratic Republic of Congo is the second-largest nation in Africa and one of the most impoverished countries in the world.

The country of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a nation with a past full of change and instability. Not many countries out there today have gone through the hardships of this recovering nation. The Congolese people have truly faced a troubled past that no human should ever have to deal with. I sometimes don’t realize just how fortunate I am to have been raised in America. I’ve never had to deal with hunger, disease, poverty, or war. Most of DRC citizens have faced every one of these life-threatening obstacles. Trying to forget its conflicted past, the Democratic Republic of Congo struggles daily to keep their people alive and well. All of the issues they face today can be focused around a difficult past full of conflict, destroyed infrastructure, incorrect agricultural practices, failure of disease control, and inadequate water supply. The DRC can get back on the right path if the world will help them in assisting vulnerable populations and improving the effectiveness of humanitarian relief and food aid in the former conflict zones of this desperate country.

Country of Democratic Republic of Congo:

Located in central-Africa, DRC is the eleventh largest country in the world. It would cover nearly one-fourth of the United States. It has a small coastline bordering the South Atlantic Ocean. With the equator

running through the center of DRC, the climate is tropical. It consists of a dry, humid weather, but in the southern highlands it is slightly cooler and contains moisture. The Congo River runs through the central part of the country and many people rely on this large river every day.

According to The CIA World Factbook, DRC has a population of approximately 73.5 million people, with the median age of citizens being 17.6 years old. (Congo, Democratic Republic of the, CIA). They are ranked 19th for the highest birth rate and 42nd for the highest death rate. The life expectancy is currently about 52 years old, which is not terrible when compared to some third-world countries. However, by helping educate them and aiding in feeding them, we could make sure that most Congolese people live a long, full life.

Although they are a country with a huge potential to be very wealthy, conflict has lead them into debt, and people of this country are not in good living conditions. They are a country who has struggled throughout their history because of conflict.

Lifestyle and Education:

Large families are very common in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The average household has five children. It is not considered uncommon for a mother to lose at least two children before the age of five. For every 1,000 births, nearly 74 infants die, which is one of the worst rates in the world. This is an alarming statistic. The infant survival rate is low because of hunger and disease. Parents cannot take care of their children because they do not have the resources to do so.

Thirty-five percent of the Congolese population lives urbanely, which means the majority of the population lives in rural areas. However, many of these people have been torn apart by conflict that has left them homeless, jobless, and the with the inability to correctly grow their agricultural products.

According to the World Food Program, about 69% of the population is literate. They can speak the official French language and also Lingala. (Congo, Democratic Republic of, World Food Program). Most people receive about eight years of education, which is not great but is adequate. Education is not the main reason that this country has struggled. They have been surrounded by conflict and have not had political leadership to provide agriculturists with stable markets.

Conflict, War, and Government:

Conflict is the main reason that many of the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo are starving and in need of assistance. DRC was formed in 1908 and was at that time known as Belgian Congo. They suffered from political instability from early on. In 1965, Col. Joseph Mobutu took control of the country and declared himself president. He renamed the county Zaire. For thirty-two years he remained in power, scamming the country and taking political control. He used brutal force and torture to gain control of the people of Zaire. Civil wars broke out and refugees from Rwanda caused the country to go into complete disarray in the 1990s. Beginning in late 1994, the war and genocide in neighboring Rwanda spilled over to Zaire. Rwandan Hutu militia forces fled Rwanda following the ascension of a Tutsi-led government. They used Hutu refugee camps in eastern Zaire as bases for incursions against Rwanda. In October 1996, Rwandan troops (RPA) entered Zaire, simultaneously with the formation of an armed coalition led by Laurent-Desire Kabila known as the Alliance des Forces Democratiques pour la Liberation du Congo-Zaire (AFDL). With the goal of forcibly ousting Mobutu, the AFDL, supported by Rwanda and Uganda, began a military campaign. Following failed peace talks between Mobutu and Kabila in May 1997, Mobutu left the country. In 1999, Uganda led the rebel group, MLC, into DRC where they established control over most of DRC. In 2002, these forces signed a treaty that withdrew many of the Rwandan forces. By 2003, the government led by the MLC had gained some control and was

transitioning into a democratic state. These conflicts are said to be among the largest since World War II. A lot of oppression is still continuing today, despite the governments' best efforts to maintain control.

Currently, the Lord's Resistance Army, led by Joseph Kony has been oppressing people, mostly in Uganda, but in the DRC as well. This army has been kidnapping children and selling the girls as sex-slaves and turning the boys into child soldiers. This group has left people terrified and continues to cause suffering in Uganda and the DRC.

These conflicts have had a terrible effect on the people of DRC. Many people have been unable to recover from the destruction caused by the conflict. The following statement from the World Food Program describes just how atrocious life still is for many in DRC:

The eastern groups are still plagued with violence, with civilians targeted by marauding armed groups. People have to flee from one place to the other desperately trying to escape harassment from these armed forces. They are still suffering from rape, looting of goods, foods and crops, abduction and all kind of physical and psychological harassment (Congo, Democratic Republic of, World Food Program).

Agriculture and Industry:

The Democratic Republic of Congo currently relies heavily on its' main industry, mining. They mine many different ores, including diamonds, gold, copper, and cobalt. Nearly half of these exported products are sent to China. Without their mining industry, the country of DRC would likely not exist.

The DRC also relies on the agricultural products that its people produce. Their main crops include coffee, bananas, sugar, peanuts, and corn. People from rural areas do not live in great conditions however. Many people have been unable to continue farming on their lands from being displaced because of conflict. They've been plagued with hunger, brutality, and instability among their families. These factors have not allowed farmers to make enough money or have a market to sell their products. Because of this, many farmers have been unable to provide just for their own families.

Only 3% of the Congolese land is currently used for agricultural purposes. This means that agriculture is currently suffering in DRC for a vast number of reasons. Seventy-seven percent of the land consists of forests and woodlands, but this is not an industry for the country.

The lack of agricultural success and the inability to recover from conflict has left the Democratic Republic of Congo in debt \$3.9 billion (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Bureau of African Affairs). It has also left the country with poor infrastructure, deteriorating agricultural conditions, and a negative outlook about the future of DRC.

Health Issues:

Caused mostly by the conflict that has destroyed DRC over the past 60 years, health conditions are very poor. It is estimated that currently 4.5 million Congolese people are in dire need of food and shelter. Ten percent of the population currently has general acute malnutrition (Republic of Congo, Global Food Security). Many people lack basic services such as water and health services, agricultural productivity, and inability for disease control.

Fifty-four percent of the population currently does not have improved water quality and 72% in rural areas. The risk of contracting disease is among the highest in the world. Malaria, Hepatitis A, bacterial

diarrhea, and the plague have been spreading at dangerous rates. Many peoples' health conditions are deteriorating like never before.

These health issues have a huge impact on DRC as they try to "get off the ground." Now that conflict has passed its peak, people have tried to recover. But with their resources so limited and a vast majority of the population suffering from hunger or other conditions, many are finding it hard to keep their families afloat.

Solution:

Going back to the quote by Mother Theresa, I don't think that we as Americans have the ability to perfect the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, I do believe that we can help them recover from an awful past, one step at a time. Our first step should be assisting vulnerable populations and improving the effectiveness of humanitarian relief and food aid in the former conflict zones of DRC. Before we can focus on any other areas that could use improvement, we have to provide them with humanitarian relief such as shelters and protection. We also have to aid them by sending food.

Through organizations like Feed My Starving Children, my town has locally made an impact. Two years ago, we made 100,000 bags of food that could feed an individual for six days or a family of six for one day. This May, we are planning to do the same. These food packages go out to people in third-world countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The World Food Program, formed from the United Nations, has also made an impact in aiding the people of DRC. Their relief operation, which was set in place in July of 2007, will continue through December of this year. The target of this operation is people who are suffering from current conflict or recovering from past conflict. In 2011, the WFP delivered food to 4.4 million people in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which was a cost of \$323 million for the United Nations.

Extraordinary organizations like the two mentioned above are exactly the type of help that DRC needs. They are providing them with the emergency resources they need to survive. The more global support these African countries have, the more they will be able to get out of the endless hole of devastation that they are currently in.

Education, stability, and rebuilding infrastructure are crucial to helping the DRC get back on its feet. If we can educate farmers on proper farming techniques, they will be more productive and feed not only themselves, but their neighbors as well. American agriculturists can teach them simple farming techniques and provide them with drought-resistant crops to help prepare them for any tough climate situations.

It is scary to believe that citizens of DRC often do not feel safe in their own homes. Their lives have been so corrupt and uncertain that many of the people just need to feel stable again. If we can help them to create safe communities, they will be able to be more self-sustainable. We need to let them know that they aren't in this alone and provide the stability that they currently live without.

Lastly, the country's infrastructure has been torn apart by the fighting that has been going on in their country. "Farmers in the DRC have problems moving their product from production sites to consumption centers given the fact that roads are impassable and river boats do not exist," says Jean-Baptiste Lubamba, who is the editor-in-chief of *Voice of the Congolese Farmer* (qtd. in *Paving the Way, The Furrow*). It is common for farmers to bike to larger areas with markets with 175 pounds of goods on their back. Sometimes, these farmers drown in overloaded dinghies along the way. Because it is so difficult for farmers to get their products to the places they need to go, a lot of their crops are left to rot. Traders

charge farmers a fortune to transport their products for them. It is currently cheaper to ship grain from the U.S. to Kenya than it is to ship it from Malawi to Kenya, which is 1,000 miles fewer. (Paving the Way, The Furrow). The key to informing the people about new agricultural research is getting the product to distributors throughout the country. Another huge part of rebuilding infrastructure is developing safe water supplies. Irrigated cropland makes it easier for the farmer. Women can also spend less time walking miles away to fetch water and more time assisting to the needs of their crops, livestock, and families. Infrastructure is the key to regaining stability in a country in disarray.

Conclusion:

The Democratic Republic of Congo needs our assistance by first helping them with their immediate needs: hunger and disease prevention. The thing that they need most of all is stability. They have suffered sixty years too long, and it is time for us to help them get back on their feet. No nation should have to go through such hardships from conflict and war. The past that they have faced has led them into poverty. Their people cannot take care of themselves, as they have become deprived of the resources they used to have. They no longer have the access or stability to produce the food necessary to feed their people. They are not in great financial standing and are still recovering from being in utter chaos.

More than anything, this country needs our help. Maybe we as Americans cannot save every Congolese life. However, every life that we try to help could lead towards another child living to be old, well-nourished, and possibly even happy. We have the power to help those who are less fortunate. We can change the world.

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