

Conflict in the Congo

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October 4, 2013
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Charlotte Simon (Mothers of Congo)

“Please help me to stop this 21st century slaughter!” – this was the impassioned plea from Charlotte Simon representing the Mothers of Congo NGO. Recounting the desperate plight of victims of sexual violence in the war-torn Eastern Congo, she challenged the politicians of the Western world who have unconditionally supported culpable African leaders in neighbouring Rwanda and Uganda to explain how they could permit the tragic devastation and exploitation of both the people and natural wealth of her country.

In a conference to mark the UN International Day of Peace (annually commemorated on 21 September) UPF turned its attention to the rarely publicised conflict in the heart of Africa involving the Congo and neighbouring nations. A small but highly engaged group of 20 participants gathered at the Peace Embassy in Thornton Heath to hear the background and tragic stories behind the deadliest conflict since World War II, which has claimed the lives of more than 5 million African people. The first presenter, Ajay Rai, an independent film-maker, showed the shortened version of a feature-length documentary in the making, entitled “Crisis in the Congo: Uncovering the Truth” (see <http://congojustice.org/>). This powerful feature set the scene by explaining the origins of the conflict and its tragic aftermath, which included murder, plunder, and sexual violence on a horrific scale. Ajay pointed out that when he was called to assist with making of this documentary he had to ask himself why he did not know anything about this situation despite his awareness of world affairs in his position as a media insider. Yet we in the Western world benefit enormously from the minerals extracted mostly in illegal mines controlled by rebel militia and gangs operating amidst the chaos of the ongoing conflict. Minerals such as tantalum and tungsten from the region are used in key components in a wide range of electronic equipment including our much-loved mobile phones and tablet computers.

In the second presentation, Charlotte Simon spoke about her personal recollection of the invasion by Rwandan and Ugandan troops in Kisangani (Congo’s third largest city) in 1998, opening with the words: “I’ve lived it and seen it”. Speaking in tears about the slaughter of her nation, she described the horror of children ravaged by hunger and of families utterly destroyed by rape used as a systematic instrument of war. But she also showed in a video feature how women in the region are displaying courage, speaking out, supporting and helping each other to heal. She explained how the TG Foundation, which she has been assisting, has successfully raised funds for medical operations for female victims in the Congo and to send their children, born of rape, to school.

In an extensive Q&A session with the audience, Ajay and Charlotte responded to searching questions covering several dimensions of the conflict, ranging from the motives and psychology of the perpetrators of extreme sexual violence to the role of neighboring countries as conduits for the smuggling of minerals that find their way to Western corporations. Time and again the dialogue with the audience turned towards the issue of why the media does not publicise what is going on in the heart of Africa. As the documentary mentioned, the crisis in the Congo has “succeeded in getting little purchase on the public’s imagination”. On the positive side, there is ongoing progress being made in efforts to encourage the European Union to adopt similar laws on the responsible sourcing of conflict minerals to those recently enacted as part of the Dodd-Frank Law in the US.

The conference was truly heart-wrenching in its exposition of the tragedy that the beautiful land of Congo has suffered and continues to experience, but it served its purpose in increasing awareness of the ongoing humanitarian crisis. Through concerned individuals and organisations making connections with people in politics, media and every day life, the truth will surely be revealed for all to see, and the call to action to bring peace in the region will gain ever greater momentum.