

Crisis in the Congo

May 22, 2008

Just imagine the equivalent of 9/11 striking the United States not once, but once every couple of days for a period of six years. There would be a public outcry unlike anything the world has ever seen. But when the carnage happens in the Congo, the public outcry is virtually non-existent.

A new survey by the International Rescue Committee found that 5.4 million people have died from war-related causes in the Democratic Republic of Congo since 1998, making it the world's deadliest war since WW II.

The majority of Congolese war casualties die from malaria, pneumonia and malnutrition. Forced to flee from their homes, many Congolese are driven into the forest where small infections become fatal wounds.

And the wounds in the Congo run deep. Exploitation and the struggle for power have plagued the Congo since Belgian King Leopold II set up his private colony in the late 1880's. He treated the land and the people like personal possessions, viciously exploiting the Congo's rubber and ivory. According to Human Rights Watch researcher Anneke Van Woudenberg, "Up to ten million people died in slave labor, mostly in the two decades before the First World War, when the international demand for rubber was at its height."

But the ruthless exploitation in the Congo didn't stop when Belgian Colonial rule ended in 1960. After the assassination of the Congo's first elected Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, President Mobutu Sese Seko seized power through a political coup. "Congo entered a new phase of dictatorship where

greed remained a constant,” writes Anneke Van Woudenberg. “The president and his political elite plundered mercilessly, sending the country into a long, slow economic decline. Under Mobutu the country’s citizens perfected lessons of survival akin to those learned under Leopold and ones they would continue to use during Congo’s years of war.”

In 1997, the Second Congo War began not long after a rebel group ousted Mobutu, finally ending his 32 years of corruption and predatory thievery. “Yet despite the signing of the Lusaka Peace Accords in 1999, followed by agreements for the withdrawal of Rwandan and Ugandan forces from the Congo in 2002,” Human Rights Watch reports “fighting in the northeastern province of Ituri intensified.”

The Ituri province is one of the Congo’s richest, but until its vast deposits of diamonds, gold, copper, coltan (a key element in cell phones, laptops and video game systems) and cobalt (a metal used in aircraft manufacture), can benefit the entire population, rival armies competing for control of the resources will continue to fuel violence.

Last month’s plane crash in Goma brought the Democratic Republic of Congo some short-lived press coverage. This month, allegations of UN peacekeepers in eastern Congo committing sexual abuses once again garnered media attention. But it shouldn’t take a plane crash or a sex scandal for us to pay attention to the atrocities occurring in the Congo.

5.4 million dead and another 1,200 people dying each day, by International Rescue Committee estimates. The war in the Congo may be over, but the atrocities that demand our attention persist.