

## HEART OF THE CONGO The Historical Background

In 1960, the Democratic Republic of Congo gained its independence from Belgium. Within months of Congo's independence, its first democratically-elected leader, Patrice Lumumba, was assassinated by political enemies, with the tacit support of the CIA. At the height of the cold war, the U.S. feared that the left-leaning Lumumba would fall under the political, military and economic influence of the Soviet Union. Lumumba was replaced by Mobutu Sese Seko, who reigned as the Congo's dictator for 32 years.

Mobutu was a virtual monarch and in many ways fashioned his reign after that of the Belgian King, Leopold II, who exploited Congo and her people in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The pattern under Mobutu's regime was one of repeatedly "killing the goose that laid the golden egg." The Congo has many "golden eggs": uranium, copper, gold, cotton, diamonds, and a host of precious metals in quantities only dreamed of in other countries. By rights it should be one of the richest nations in the world. Yet it is one of the poorest because, in the taking of its precious resources first by Europeans, then by Mobutu himself, there has been no thought for the nurturing of infrastructure, education, rule of law and social justice.

Western powers, working through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, supported Mobutu's regime, identifying it as a bulwark against communist influence in Africa. For 20 years, World Bank loans paid for the dictator's lavish palaces, fleets of private Mercedes cars, Boeing jets, and payoffs to political cronies.

The result is a country and a population that has been demoralized by a century of economic rape and pillage - first by King Leopold, then by the Belgian government itself, and finally by its own leader, who could not have survived without the compliance of the U.S. and Western European powers.

In 1997, Mobutu Sese Seko was finally toppled in a coup led by Laurent Kabila, but this so-called "liberation" did not bring democracy or relief from poverty. Kabila was backed by the armies of neighboring Rwanda and Uganda, but these "allies" soon turned against him for harboring Hutu militiamen who had been complicit in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Coming to Kabila's rescue were troops from Angola, Chad, Namibia and Zimbabwe.

This new conflict, which started in 1998, lasted for five years. The Congo's incredible natural wealth motivated the participation of armies from seven nations. The riches made the war economically sustainable, with big bonuses for those closest to the mines and other sources of wealth. This war directly and indirectly caused one of the highest death tolls of any conflict since World War II, including one million civilian deaths in the eastern Congo. Many died from disease and starvation after their villages were pillaged and crops were burned. Because of the number of casualties and involvement of many armies this war has been called the "first African World War."

In January 2001, Laurent Kabila was assassinated. His son, Joseph Kabila, took over, intent on finding a way to end his father's war. In the closing months of 2002, hundreds of Congolese political and civic leaders met in Sun City, South Africa, to try to lay the groundwork for the country's postwar future. On Dec. 17, 2002, a major peace agreement was signed and foreign troops began to pull out of the eastern Congo. A new coalition government was formed in July 2003. Since, the country has been relatively calm and reunification is slowly taking place.

In the spring of 2003 Tom Weidlinger went to Malemba N'Kulu in Katanga Province (Eastern Congo) to portray the progress of a recently established Action Against Hunger base. The region had been heavily impacted by the war. Over 1.5 million people had been uprooted by the fighting and mortality rates were high. Weidlinger's film tells the story of the aid workers and the people living in that region.

At present (December 2004) Action Against Hunger continues to operate health, water sanitation, and food security programs at Malemba N'Kulu and in several other provinces in the Eastern Congo.