

CONGO MEMORIES

By John C. Vaughan III

Forty five years ago from March 31 to December 7, 1961 I was on temporary duty from Dover AFB, Delaware to Europe and Africa as part of "Operation New Tape". I was the C-124 "Globemaster" Aircraft Maintenance Officer. I was 23 years old and a brand new USAF 1st Lieutenant. Our main base was Leopoldville(now known as Kinshasa), Congo. Their 14 million population had just been granted its independence from Belgium. We had about 300 aircraft mechanics and maps of 3 continents to plan our operations. Our support base was Chateauroux Air Station, France.



Our mission was to provide the U. S. support for a United Nations mission to bring peace to the tribal provincial conflicts that followed Congo independence. India and 16 other countries provided the troops; the U. S. airlifted everyone in and out with 12 big C-124 cargo aircraft. We wore Bermuda shorts, no uniforms except at Chateauroux. Americans were only military UN personnel not to have weapons. Never saw a news reporter. I had one B-4 flight bag and a military sleeping bag for 9 months, 17 countries, and 70,000 miles traveled. All was fine. Young bachelors don't need much.

Here are some of my memories:

1. The Grand Hotel in Khartoum, Sudan was very pleasant, clean and friendly. My first African breakfast was with our flight crew at the airport in Khartoum. My coffee had a dead roach floating in it. This began my 8 months of food anxiety - - I learned to appreciate the WWII K rations we stockpiled on the aircraft - - cold ham and scalloped potatoes 16 years old in a can really tasted great when you had nothing else safe to eat! To this day I carry a protein bar handy, and I appreciate any safe food or drink.
2. The British were the best people I met. Black Africans were very friendly, but northern African Arabs were cold and unfriendly to us. Best couple I met was "British Overseas" in Dar es Salaam, Tanganyika (now Tanzania). They had some of us over for dinner. She was a nurse and ran a great nurses training school that she had created from scratch. He had built all the buildings. They had dedicated their lives to helping, but they were told to leave after Tanganyika independence - sad. On Independence Day some natives came to center of Dar with buckets to get some "uhuru", Swahili for "freedom".
3. It was wild driving my USAF WWII jeep to work in Congo from the modern Lovanium University to the airport. Custom there was if you could hop on inside or outside of any vehicle you could ride for free. I got pretty good at not coming to a stop. The university had all modern buildings on a spacious campus. The faculty home they let me and the flight crews stay in was well equipped with the finest hi-fi sound equipment and a grand piano provided by Rockefeller or Ford Foundation. The piano seemed out of place. The beautiful university was now almost deserted.



4. Congo art was colorful. For one dollar I bought ten paintings 10”x 12”.



5. My wildest dance ever. We were centerpoint refueling an aircraft at night on a dark flight line while also offloading for quick turn around in Accra, Ghana. We always took fuel plugs out of top of wing so we didn't bust a fuel line with overpressure. But our guy at the flight deck panel fell asleep. This particular aircraft auxiliary ground power unit (MD-3) was notorious for throwing off sparks while running alongside aircraft. When I walked by the aircraft I heard this unusual noise in the dark. I walked under wing to be hit with a Niagara Falls of aviation fuel. The aircraft was standing in a sea of fuel. I woke my guy up, cut off fuel, and told him to disconnect power unit and pull it out of the "lake". Then I ran up ramp into aircraft to yell as loud and frantically as I could for about 15 natives to quit unloading cargo and get the hell off the aircraft before it blew. I think I over did it. They just froze and watched me yell and dance around like something probably no one has ever seen before. Ten long seconds of just being frozen and watching me, then when big power unit was cut off - - total darkness and no sound and aircraft was completely empty in next 4 seconds - - except for me. Never saw guys move so fast.
6. I never got homesick (it was too interesting and exciting) until Paris in December in stores decorated for Christmas. Then it hit. Single, no steady girlfriend, miss folks and USA.... time to come home. Dover AFB part of the mission about over anyway, I couldn't stay longer.
7. I finally had become a good aircraft maintenance officer. It took 27 months! The mechanics and senior sergeants and I finally were a proven, trusted team. We learned to work under all conditions. So when I got back I was promoted to "Command 3" - - the evening and grave shift maintenance duty officer for all flight line operations at Dover AFB until summer 1962. I then left to go to the Air Force Institute of Technology for a 24 month Masters Program in Astronautics.
8. I learned to listen to the older sergeants after my first meeting with all my maintenance troops in the big hanger at Leopoldville, Congo. After the meeting the top sergeant (line chief) asked if he could speak to me in private. "How old are you Lt?" "23" "Let's see, I was fixing airplanes 5 years before you were born." Pause. "You are right, Sarge, what can I do to help you?" He smiled, we got along well after that, I was happier and less tense and so were the troops! Sarge first gave me the job of seeing if I could work with the airport manager and keep the airport coffee shop open 24 hours a day for our guys - I was able to do that.





9. Almost all the natives in Congo had one shirt, so you knew them by their shirt. The sergeants learned to buy very inexpensive red shirts in Chateauroux BX and barter them for all sorts of goodies and services throughout Africa. One native offered me 3 months salary for my \$5 red sports shirt. The Belgians left a world class Primus beer brewery in Leopoldville, and a Beta shoe factory making nice 69¢

tennis shoes. They never got much into shirts.



10. When I was flying back to Europe on a C-133 in September, Major Moore was in the left seat and I was glad he was our most experienced pilot. On descent into France we hit incredible icing. The anti-ice system did one engine at a time, #1, #3, #2, #4, #1, #3.... we had 6 airstarts of turboprops as ice went through and stalled the engine. We had 1 or 2 airstarts going at once for many minutes. I was on flight deck watching it all, and saying a few Hail Marys.
11. We landed once in Leo and maintenance guys found 2 bullet holes in back of aircraft. Since aircraft was the last unpressurized plane USAF had, we never knew someone was shooting at "Old Shakey" with a rifle from the ground. We just laughed. Youth. Experts say that the part of the brain for judgment does not fully develop until the mid-twenties. I agree.
12. The December party at the officers club at Chateauroux was the same night we were scheduled to return to the U.S. I checked out of BOQ with a pick up truck full of equipment (including 30 cases of French wine) and loaded it all on the C-124. We taxied out, aborted takeoff, and came back. I found out later that flight crew buddies played with the mixture ratio and fouled the plugs on purpose, left aircraft and went to party. Maintenance had to change 96 spark plugs in one engine in the middle of the night. I finally got back to BOQ to find no rooms left – everyone comes in for this annual party - but flight crew "friends" never checked out of their rooms. They never planned to depart.
13. I was one of five bachelor officers and one married officer hanging out together in Chateauroux Officers club one night. The married guy picked up one great looking gal while we sat alone. At the end of the evening we found out that, shortly after he met her, he told her how funny he felt being the only single guy out with 5 married guys...he snaked us.
14. By Christmas eve we were back at Dover AFB, Delaware. That night one of the last of our aircraft returned from Europe. Sometimes, but rarely, the C-124 could takeoff from Prestwick, Scotland and (if head winds were light) they could flyover Newfoundland base and make it all the way to Dover without stopping overnight to refuel. I was Command 3 that night. The flight crew landed, left the aircraft on taxiway at the end of the runway, called for crew bus, and left. They signed maintenance form "#2 and #3 engines cut off during taxi." We later signed off the repair form "refueled aircraft". No one got in trouble, but we all knew how stupid they were.

15. At Stockholm, Sweden two young mechanics never showed up to leave after one week there - - they fell in love with 2 beautiful girls. It was my only discipline problem in 9 months. Crews were motivated - - not like chicken stuff sometimes at U.S. home base. They knew we were doing the real thing. In fact I usually had to watch out they didn't work too many hours. They would close engine cowlings on their own hands or fall off maintenance stands when too tired and overworked.
16. We landed in Stockholm for a 10 day stay and were surprised to be met by the U.S. Embassy and Swedish customs who boarded our aircraft. Only time that ever happened in all the countries. The Embassy warned us never to drive drunk because they had U.S. soldiers in jail there that congressman visits couldn't get out. Then the customs guy asks our group "Do you have any alcohol or tobacco?" Well that was about 50% of our luggage that was all around us in the middle of the aircraft! We were all learning to be entrepreneurs and Swedish taxes made certain things 10 times the price of Chateauroux BX. I had a case of magnums of champagne at \$2.80/bottle. Total silence to the question. I didn't know what to do. Then a voice from back says "No Sir" and customs guy quickly said "Okay" and left. We had one guy on board who didn't bring anything. He was our hero for saving everyone time and money.
17. The most impressive people I met were the Swedes. Their troops flew down to Leo in sharp-looking civilian clothes. They were calmly reading various books before takeoff. We operated from Stockholm Arlanda airport where they did their periodic maintenance on their DC-8s in 24 hours, including engine replacements and a flight test. Same type of job took us 5 days back at Dover AFB. We had a C-124 electrical fire in the battery system and they helped us fix it. The next day they prepared an engineering report describing how to improve the "poorly designed" system. I enjoyed handing the report to the Douglas tech rep at Dover when I returned.
18. We fixed an aircraft engine in Dar es Salaam by bringing in a mechanic with special drills from a civilian ship in harbor. He got a kick out of that and did it for free.
19. Dar es Salaam business was all done by Indians - even little bicycle repair shops in poorest part of town. They are good at making a little \$ go a long way. Umoja hotel booked up, so we had to take next best place. ☺

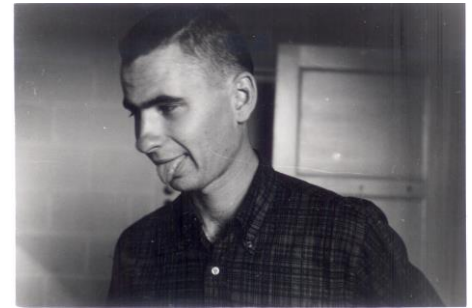


President Julius Nyerere (white suit) flew on our C-124 and had the officers over for dinner.



20. In Cairo, Egypt everyone just had to buy something, such as large brass trays. I bought a foot stool. When we got to Leo, all the flight crew took their stuff and last guy came by to tell me everything was gone from aircraft except one "camel saddle". I complained to him and others that someone took my stuff - - but they just shrugged and said they got what they bought. I went into back of aircraft by myself and, --- there was my foot stool. Sitting there quietly and looking at my purchase carefully, I realized that my "foot stool" was a camel saddle - - and I rode a camel the day before at the pyramids! I hid my saddle, and later saw the flight crew and made up some story that my purchase was found some other place.....

21. "Bud" Kensok, my bachelor roommate from Dover, met his wife at Chateauroux . She was daughter of the F-105 tech rep. Bud impressed me by changing our R-4360 engine - - biggest recip engine ever - - with no hoist. He and his troops cut down trees in Katanga province, Congo, and made a big tripod hoist.



22. Bud and I had to return to Dover, Delaware in the middle of all of this - - Sept 17 to 19 - -to sign in and out again. AF regs said no one could be on temporary duty for more than 6 months and no one at Dover wanted to take our places. We loved the adventure and extra money. We lived off our travel money and saved our salaries. On the way back to U.S. we stopped Sept 16 at 2:00 pm at Harmon AFB Newfoundland for crew rest/refuel. We took off at 4:55 am on the 17th. Lt. Col. Bede was an older WWII pilot and the only married and mature guy in the flight crew. He went to bed early. The rest of us went to the club to party. I told Bud at 2 am I quit - - let's get some sleep. Our wake up call at 3:55 am was followed by loud banging as the rest of the flight crew returned, bouncing off the walls of the BOQ. We had to help the co-pilot up the crew ladder. He passed out before takeoff in his seat. Lt. Col. Bede flew us safely home, lifting the gear and confidently doing all the other co-pilot duties - - as well his pilot's job. The co-pilot later got on oxygen and helped with the landing in U.S. No one reported anything. Something like that would never come close to happening after the WWII guys retired.

23. Little mistakes are O.K., but maintenance officers should not destroy aircraft. I almost did. In Dar es Salaam we were picking up 3,000 Indian and Gurkha troops and equipment and their bags of rice. They came by ship to Dar and we were airlifting them across Africa to Leo on the west coast. My loadmaster had no equipment to weigh loads or to load the aircraft with pallets and forklifts. Everything was by hand. No problem, he and I figured we would take 1 bag of rice across the airport to a scale we found, and then carefully count bags and multiply. One problem, the bag we weighed was about half the weight of those the ground crew chose to load.... Fortunately the flight crew aborted the take off roll, since they never would have lifted off the runway. The reverse thrust and panic stop just before the end of the gravel runway threw up a lot of gravel and tore some deicer strips from the propellers, but no one reported the incident. We quickly figured our problem, offloaded a lot of bags of rice, and I was still a new 1st Lt.....

24. Our visit to Cairo, Egypt was interesting. The flight crew and I arrived late at night at the third class Orient Palace Hotel. A guy came to our room immediately, said most restaurants and room service were closed but he could go out and bring us food. He helped us make up an order, we paid him in advance and that was last time we saw him..... We thought he was a hotel

employee. Beds were so dirty we slept on top in our clothes and shoes. Door had no lock so people were coming in asking for "Baksheesh" - - money. So we told this big guy to guard our door all night long and we would pay him in the morning. We heard several scuffles outside the door, but then we could sleep. The next day even the camel tried to bite me.



25. The first night of our 10 day stay in Dublin, Ireland we were having a flight crew party with the owners of our little hotel and the owner's friends. At midnight, owner said party must end; no one could be at hotel except registered guests. Instead we moved party to our aircraft! Ground power, radios to music, big cargo dance floor, then loud knock. Airport police. We made front page of Dublin paper, but apparently no one at Dover ever heard of it. Dublin was great. Everyone could sing. Ireland had the oldest average age in Europe to get married and lowest divorce rate.

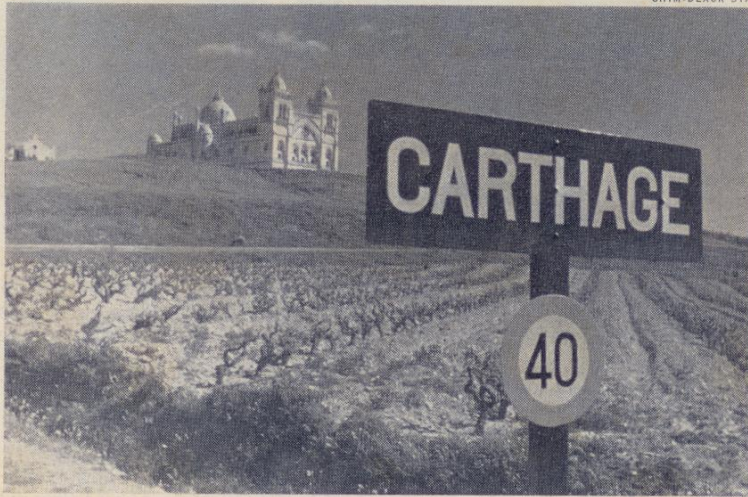
Time Magazine
July 24, 1964

ROMAN CATHOLICS

Cartago Amputanda Est

For the second time in 1,000 years, Roman Catholicism has closed up shop in the land that gave the church such great names as St. Cyprian of Carthage, Tertullian, the heretic Donatus, the virgin martyrs Perpetua and Felicity. Just concluded is a formal agreement between the Vatican and the government

Church. Paul has also established a new Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions, headed by Paolo Cardinal Marella of the Curia. In the past, the church has sometimes preferred noisy and heroic martyrdom rather than graceful surrender of ancient privileges. Now Rome, with Christian and Moslem Lebanon acting as intermediary, is trying to work out a "Tunisian formula" with Moslem-run Sudan, which this year abruptly



ST. LOUIS CATHEDRAL IN TUNISIA

In place of ancient privileges, graceful surrender.

of predominantly Moslem Tunisia that calls for the surrender without compensation of all but seven of the country's 109 Catholic churches, including the vast Cathedral of St. Louis in Tunis. The government will have the right to veto appointments to the Archbishopric of Carthage, but in return guarantees freedom of religion for Catholics, including the right to maintain parochial schools.

A Sign of Colonialism. Christianity in North Africa goes back to the 2nd century; great councils of bishops were held in Carthage. In the 7th century, Moorish swordsmen swept unchecked across North Africa, and thriving Christian communities were gradually converted to the law of Mohammed. Pope Pius IX restored the Tunisian hierarchy following the French occupation in 1881, and after World War II the country's Catholic population reached a peak of 300,000, nearly all of them Europeans. Thanks to post-independence emigration, there are 45,000 Catholics left; the empty churches stand as a sign of the old colonialism—and the church's failure in making converts among the Moslem population.

The decision to seek an amicable solution of the Tunisian problem was an outgrowth of the new, flexible Vatican diplomacy inaugurated by Pope John XXIII and carried on by Paul VI in Hungary, where he is still seeking to work out a *modus vivendi* for the

exiled all of the country's Catholic and Protestant missionaries.

Sad Prospect. The Vatican daily *L'Osservatore Romano* said that the Tunisian settlement would open "a new era of cooperation between the Holy See and the Tunisian government," and that Rome had agreed to certain sacrifices "in a spirit of friendship toward a friendly people, with cordial esteem for the values of a rising nation." There was less joy in Tunisia. "Will we have Mass this Sunday?" one priest at the cathedral asked. "We don't know. But I do know this: the extent of the takeover has shocked Catholics here." They face the prospect of seeing their churches turned into museums, libraries or schools.



26. Visited the St. Louis Cathedral in Carthage just outside Tunis, Tunisia to hear the choir sing the most beautiful sounds I have ever heard.

27. Tunisian troops wouldn't tell us who was in charge. They said they were so new at having

own Army after French left, that everything was classified secret. On flight to Leo the flight crew smelled smoke. The Tunisian troops were trying to cook a meal over a fire they built on cargo floor of our aircraft. Tunisians learned a lot in Congo, even came home with elephant tusks.



British, but Russian and Chinese communist influence was

28. The Accra, Ghana Army was well trained by the moving in all over with IL-18 turbo prop transports and Russian families and kids. The natives were still very friendly, although man in picture was checking out our aircraft for the Russians.



29. One flight that I wasn't on was one of our C-124 flying from Monrovia, Liberia over water at night to Leo. The rookie navigator had never flown below equator, where when doing

celestial navigation you subtract some sextant correction, instead of adding. He finally realized his mistakes and with great panic announced he had been giving the pilot wrong headings! Veteran pilot calmed him down, got him to best explain the situation, and then guessed some corrections. With no nav aids (but fortunately they had plenty of fuel and could look for lights), they happily found the coast and flew around awhile until they saw the lights of Leo.

30. When each mission was assigned, the flight crews did their best to plan out the legs, crew rests, etc and then told maintenance. We had to spread out our men and equipment across up to 3 continents, including places we knew nothing about. Bringing in troops from Singapore or India to Leo while based in Chateauroux, France was the most complex. One round trip mission would require the flight crews to be gone 17 days from France and fly 18,600 nautical miles, with an average flying time of 115 hours (slow aircraft).

They told us they would need a short 2 hour refueling stop someplace near Yemen on the way from New Delhi to Leo, so on the way out to Leo the first plane dropped off one of our men, a staff sergeant fuels guy. That was the last USAF aircraft he saw for 3 weeks, and no communications. The flight crews quickly found out they didn't need to stop there for fuel. When the mission was over, our last plane stopped at this remote field to try to find him!! He had worked his way up from "why are you here?" to assistant airport manager. Most of our sergeants were great entrepreneurs.

The flight crews thought out of the box too. One crew had to shut down a sick engine in flight and "feather" the prop, but they didn't want to wait weeks for an engine change in the middle of nowhere. So they restarted engine for landing enroute, took off after crew rest, feathered prop immediately after takeoff, and flew on into Leo maintenance on the 3 good engines.

There are too many other stories and memories to write about. Everyday has a story. It was a great adventure. Although we had one flight crew seriously wounded by a mob in Stanleyville, Congo before I arrived, it was a miracle there were no serious injuries to anyone while I was there. The natives quickly became peaceful. No one messed with the 2,000 Indian Gurkha soldiers. The only fatality I know of was an Egyptian officer who died water skiing.

The airlift mission lasted until January 3, 1964 when the last UN troops were flown out of the Congo. In the 3 ½ years the USAF had flown 2,310 missions, carrying 63,884 personnel and 37,202,000 pounds of cargo from 33 countries. It covered 25 ½ million miles along some of the world's most isolated air routes.

Every day for 3 years as a Dover AFB flight line maintenance officer surrounded by hundreds of teenage mechanics was an experience. Once I got my MS and PhD I spent all my time in research laboratories doing mostly theoretical work and the only thing exciting that happened during those 17 years is one day the NASA office coffee pot caught fire... So I especially cherish the Congo memories.



Since 1961 I have made it a hobby to keep up with how things are going in the ex-Belgian Congo and in all the other countries south of the vast Sahara desert that separates the Arab world from the African world. I have been amazed and heart-broken as 30 plus countries got their independence from their ex-colonial governments of Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain and have proceeded to slide continually downhill, with few or no exceptions. Since every country is independent, how can quality of life decline in all of them while the rest of the world continues to improve?!

While in Leopoldville I read a great book “Fabulous Congo” describing in detail all of the countries incredible potential and vast natural resources. I believed it all, it was so obvious, and so many good people from many developed countries wanted to help.

I recently wrote a 16 page history report on the first 17 years of the U.S., from 1607 to 1624, when Jamestown was the privately owned Virginia Company of London. It was clear that just about everyone was clueless about where this new “country” was all going. I noted: “The fact that lying, cheating, stealing, arrogance, poor decisions, cover-up, foolishness, or bluffing were common practices for just about everyone involved didn’t help for any clarity.” The same human characteristics may help explain some of Africa’s problems today (plus add tribal feuds). I have concluded that the main obstacle to a good life that everyone everywhere has always faced is their own government. How one person, like Fidel Castro, can take control of a wonderful country like Cuba and hurt all those talented people for 47 years is clearly a world-class sin.

All of us working on the U.N. Congo mission for over 3 years, starting in July 1960, certainly believed we were helping the people there. Instead, into power came Joseph Mobuto and he controlled everyone’s lives until 1997. In the process he put an estimated 4 billion dollars into his own bank accounts overseas. The Congo’s first free elections since I was there in 1961 were just held in July 2006. Their future looks bleak. Quite different from all the optimism in 1961. Far less hopes and dreams today. No new sequels to the “Fabulous Congo” are being written. Aide groups estimate that fighting between Congo’s army and rebel militias since 1998 has left some 4 million Congolese dead, many as a result of disease or hunger. Half of them children under 5. The United Nations has 17,500 peacekeepers back in the Congo today, backed up by 1,000 European Union troops, but peace is still elusive.



In sub-Saharan Africa today, about 7.5 % of all adults ages 15 – 49 are HIV-positive. All since 1994. Also in the last 10 years ethnic and political conflicts have raged in places like Congo, Sudan, Ethiopia, Liberia, and Ivory Coast. Estimates of 4 million killed, 4 million refugees and 10 million internally displaced.

What happened to Tanganyika (Tanzania today), my favorite African country, has been disappointing but not as disastrous. The cold war with communism didn't help. President Julius Nyerere worked out competing aid packages from U. S., Britain, and West Germany versus Russia, China, Communist Eastern Europe, Cuba, Algeria and Egypt. He further complicated things regionally by supporting freedom fighters to hasten independence in South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, and Portuguese Guinea. He maneuvered against the new African leaders in Zanzibar, Uganda, Ghana, Malawi, and the Congo.

Nyerere's socialist policy of co-operative farms was economic failure. By the early 1980s Tanzania's economy was on its knees. In 1985 Nyerere decided to voluntarily step down as president, openly discussing his failures as well as his successes.

Some good things - - Nyerere didn't openly grab money for himself like so many others in power. In 1978 he openly condemned the murderous regime of Idi Amin of Uganda. Also, Tanzania is now a multiparty democracy with elections first held in 1995. Nyerere banned tribal leaders and adopted Swahili as a single national language, so the country today is refreshingly free of the tribalism that has torn apart other African nations. Family values are strong and neighbors help each other. Greeting, hospitality, and courtesy are important. Modern Tanzanian women, however, are subject to high levels of discrimination in education and employment.

Life goes on despite the vicissitudes. Liberty and social mobility was created and survived in 1607-1624 America at Jamestown by a thin thread. The sub-Saharan countries of Africa today, including the Congo, could use a thin thread to miracles.



If "Congo Memories" finds its way to anyone who participated in this UN mission, I would enjoy hearing from you. Possibly you could share a couple of memories, photos or insights of your own with me and I could post them here. jvaughan8@cox.net

Africa's Cancer Today

“African nations today struggle under bad governance where unchecked hunger for power has led to impunity, manipulation of people, and other similar social political evils. This is what has impoverished the people across the African continent.”

“Bad governance by and large can be termed the cancer of Africa.”

“The cancer is eating up the continent. Africa continues to be the theater of injustices, divisions, and untenable violence. This makes present life difficult and mortgages the future of the African countries. Poverty grasps most of the population. Social evils take on an alarming breadth.”

“The killings, rapes, thievery, and all types of violence are trivialized here. The consequences of this violence deeply permeate individuals and society: hearts being more often inhabited by sin than turned to conversion, justice that creates life is divided; the truth that only can free is in a bad way. To get out of this situation, the reactions and cultures of justice and truth must be built.”

The above bleak assessment of Africa today was given by the African Catholic bishops and archbishop at their 11th congregation held October 2009. The leading spokesmen who were quoted above are: Cardinal John Njue of Kenya, Bishop Timothee Modibo-Nzockena of Gabon, and Bishop Menghisteab Tesfamariam of Eritrea.

And though no one claims solutions in Africa today are easy to find, here are three ways they proposed to make small inroads:

1. Good governance is not only a priority, but a must. Politics in Africa is so important that we cannot leave it to politicians alone. The time to act constructively is now.
2. The family is the first and indispensable school of reconciliation, justice and peace. It is in the family that one learns the sense of belonging and identity, and the values of solidarity, sharing, respect for others, hospitality, and togetherness.
3. Many African emigrants have been able to establish themselves in foreign nations. If motivated by us Africans, they are ready to make their contribution toward the improvement of life in their countries of origin. We must not exclude them from being involved in developing Africa's potentials.

October 7, 2007

Rape Epidemic Raises Trauma of Congo War

By [JEFFREY GETTLEMAN](#)

BUKAVU, Congo — Denis Mukwege, a Congolese gynecologist, cannot bear to listen to the stories his patients tell him anymore.

Every day, 10 new women and girls who have been raped show up at his hospital. Many have been so sadistically attacked from the inside out, butchered by bayonets and assaulted with chunks of wood, that their reproductive and digestive systems are beyond repair.

“We don’t know why these rapes are happening, but one thing is clear,” said Dr. Mukwege, who works in South Kivu Province, the epicenter of Congo’s rape epidemic. “They are done to destroy women.”

Eastern Congo is going through another one of its convulsions of violence, and this time it seems that women are being systematically attacked on a scale never before seen here. According to the [United Nations](#), 27,000 sexual assaults were reported in 2006 in South Kivu Province alone, and that may be just a fraction of the total number across the country.

“The sexual violence in Congo is the worst in the world,” said John Holmes, the United Nations under secretary general for humanitarian affairs. “The sheer numbers, the wholesale brutality, the culture of impunity — it’s appalling.”

The days of chaos in Congo were supposed to be over. Last year, this country of 66 million people held a historic election that cost \$500 million and was intended to end Congo’s various wars and rebellions and its tradition of epically bad government.

But the elections have not unified the country or significantly strengthened the Congolese government’s hand to deal with renegade forces, many of them from outside the country. The justice system and the military still barely function, and United Nations officials say Congolese government troops are among the worst offenders when it comes to rape. Large swaths of the country, especially in the east, remain authority-free zones where civilians are at the

mercy of heavily armed groups who have made warfare a livelihood and survive by raiding villages and abducting women for ransom.

According to victims, one of the newest groups to emerge is called the Rastas, a mysterious gang of dreadlocked fugitives who live deep in the forest, wear shiny tracksuits and Los Angeles Lakers jerseys and are notorious for burning babies, kidnapping women and literally chopping up anybody who gets in their way.

United Nations officials said the so-called Rastas were once part of the Hutu militias who fled Rwanda after committing genocide there in 1994, but now it seems they have split off on their own and specialize in freelance cruelty.

Honorata Barinjibanwa, an 18-year-old woman with high cheekbones and downcast eyes, said she was kidnapped from a village that the Rastas raided in April and kept as a sex slave until August. Most of that time she was tied to a tree, and she still has rope marks ringing her delicate neck. The men would untie her for a few hours each day to gang-rape her, she said.

“I’m weak, I’m angry, and I don’t know how to restart my life,” she said from Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, where she was taken after her captors freed her.

She is also pregnant.

While rape has always been a weapon of war, researchers say they fear that Congo’s problem has metastasized into a wider social phenomenon.

“It’s gone beyond the conflict,” said Alexandra Bilak, who has studied various armed groups around Bukavu, on the shores of Lake Kivu. She said that the number of women abused and even killed by their husbands seemed to be going up and that brutality toward women had become “almost normal.”

Malteser International, a European aid organization that runs health clinics in eastern Congo, estimates that it will treat 8,000 sexual violence cases this year, compared with 6,338 last year. The organization said that in one town, Shabunda, 70 percent of the women reported being sexually brutalized.

At Panzi Hospital, where Dr. Mukwege performs as many as six rape-related surgeries a day, bed after bed is filled with women lying on their backs, staring

at the ceiling, with colostomy bags hanging next to them because of all the internal damage.

“I still have pain and feel chills,” said Kasindi Wabulasa, a patient who was raped in February by five men. The men held an AK-47 rifle to her husband’s chest and made him watch, telling him that if he closed his eyes, they would shoot him. When they were finished, Ms. Wabulasa said, they shot him anyway.

In almost all the reported cases, the culprits are described as young men with guns, and in the deceptively beautiful hills here, there is no shortage of them: poorly paid and often mutinous government soldiers; homegrown militias called the Mai-Mai who slick themselves with oil before marching into battle; members of paramilitary groups originally from Uganda and Rwanda who have destabilized this area over the past 10 years in a quest for gold and all the other riches that can be extracted from Congo’s exploited soil.

The attacks go on despite the presence of the largest United Nations peacekeeping force in the world, with more than 17,000 troops.

Few seem to be spared. Dr. Mukwege said his oldest patient was 75, his youngest 3.

“Some of these girls whose insides have been destroyed are so young that they don’t understand what happened to them,” Dr. Mukwege said. “They ask me if they will ever be able to have children, and it’s hard to look into their eyes.”

No one — doctors, aid workers, Congolese and Western researchers — can explain exactly why this is happening.

“That is the question,” said André Bourque, a Canadian consultant who works with aid groups in eastern Congo. “Sexual violence in Congo reaches a level never reached anywhere else. It is even worse than in Rwanda during the genocide.”

Impunity may be a contributing factor, Mr. Bourque added, saying that very few of the culprits are punished.

Many Congolese aid workers denied that the problem was cultural and insisted that the widespread rapes were not the product of something

ingrained in the way men treated women in Congolese society. “If that were the case, this would have showed up long ago,” said Wilhelmine Ntakebuka, who coordinates a sexual violence program in Bukavu.

Instead, she said, the epidemic of rapes seems to have started in the mid-1990s. That coincides with the waves of Hutu militiamen who escaped into Congo’s forests after exterminating 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus during Rwanda’s genocide 13 years ago.

Mr. Holmes said that while government troops might have raped thousands of women, the most vicious attacks had been carried out by Hutu militias.

“These are people who were involved with the genocide and have been psychologically destroyed by it,” he said.

Mr. Bourque called this phenomenon “reversed values” and said it could develop in heavily traumatized areas that had been steeped in conflict for many years, like eastern Congo.

This place, one of the greenest, hilliest and most scenic slices of central Africa, continues to reverberate from the aftershocks of the genocide next door. Take the recent fighting near Bukavu between the Congolese Army and Laurent Nkunda, a dissident general who commands a formidable rebel force. Mr. Nkunda is a Congolese Tutsi who has accused the Congolese Army of supporting Hutu militias, which the army denies. Mr. Nkunda says his rebel force is simply protecting Tutsi civilians from being victimized again.

But his men may be no better.

Willermine Mulihano said she was raped twice — first by Hutu militiamen two years ago and then by Nkunda soldiers in July. Two soldiers held her legs apart, while three others took turns violating her.

“When I think about what happened,” she said, “I feel anxious and brokenhearted.”

She is also lonely. Her husband divorced her after the first rape, saying she was diseased.

In some cases, the attacks are on civilians already caught in the cross-fire between warring groups. In one village near Bukavu where 27 women were raped and 18 civilians killed in May, the attackers left behind a note in broken Swahili telling the villagers that the violence would go on as long as government troops were in the area.

The United Nations peacekeepers here seem to be stepping up efforts to protect women.

Recently, they initiated what they call “night flashes,” in which three truckloads of peacekeepers drive into the bush and keep their headlights on all night as a signal to both civilians and armed groups that the peacekeepers are there. Sometimes, when morning comes, 3,000 villagers are curled up on the ground around them.

But the problem seems bigger than the resources currently devoted to it.

Panzi Hospital has 350 beds, and though a new ward is being built specifically for rape victims, the hospital sends women back to their villages before they have fully recovered because it needs space for the never-ending stream of new arrivals.

Dr. Mukwege, 52, said he remembered the days when Bukavu was known for its stunning lake views and nearby national parks, like Kahuzi-Biega.

“There used to be a lot of gorillas in there,” he said. “But now they’ve been replaced by much more savage beasts.”

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December 20, 2009

Anti-Christian Violence Grows in Congo.

Father Dan Nakamaga was killed in Kabare when gunmen stormed his home. Two days later Sister Denise Kahambu was killed in an attack on a Trappist monastery north of Bukavu. “People are traumatized and very afraid. The Congolese are fed up of crying and dying” said the Catholic vicar.

I guess this concept of “The Fabulous Congo” is so far removed from reality at this point, that I will never see those hopes and dreams return in my lifetime... John