

Following the flag in Africa – CONGO (BRAZZAVILLE) TERRITORY

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In the mid-90s, Commissioners John and Norma Swinfen spent three years in Congo as territorial leaders. They recently returned to that territory, where they conducted two Brengle holiness seminars and two united divisional public meetings, as well as laid a stone for a new hall, visited a recently revived school and a new clinic, conducted a Spiritual Day with the cadets of the Crossbearers Session, and visited the newly repaired and reopened THQ complex in Brazzaville. They write:

The Republic of Congo is a small country with a population in the region of 2.7 million. And one in every hundred is a Salvationist!!

It co-exists uneasily with its giant neighbor, The People's Democratic Republic of the Congo (Zaire) across the vast river they share.

ROCKY INDEPENDENCE

Congo gained independence from France in the 1960s, and spent a number of years under governments with communist ideologies and close links with the USSR.

"Democratic" rule took over in the late 1980s, to be succeeded by a period of massive civil strife which resulted in three wars in six years. During these wars, the destruction and looting of property was very serious—Army buildings, vehicles and equipment were also widely affected. More serious was the human toll: thousands were displaced from home and lost all they possessed, thousands were injured and thousands were killed.

The natural potential of the country, given by God for the prosperity of the people, has been largely used selfishly or left undeveloped through inept and greedy government.

Energies and resources needed for development have been dissipated in war or diverted into the pockets of the powerful.

A major raw material actually developed is offshore oil, but its benefit has been, at best, dubious. Powerful international interests, vying for oil rights, have suborned various power-hungry factions in the country, facilitating their acquisition of armaments together with some kind of immunity from international peacekeeping intervention. This has loosed the dogs of war. Militia groups have proliferated, killing and looting with impunity, and every lawless element has had carte blanche to run riot.

TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES

The mass of the population—peaceful, family-oriented, eager only to build a secure life for themselves and their children—has been at the mercy of every unscrupulous adventurer and brigand, and has suffered immeasurably.

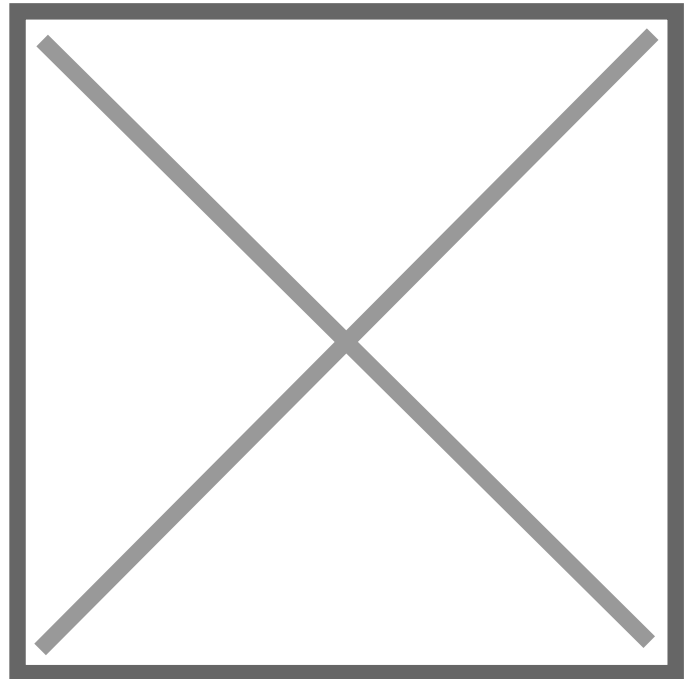
Yet a conspiracy of silence seems to have surrounded the Congo tragedies, with the shocking inhumanities of the wars and the iniquities of unscrupulous power struggles, at times verging on tribal/ethnic cleansing, hardly rippling the surface of news media in the rest of the world.

Populous residential and commercial areas have become ghost towns, and entire rural villages were destroyed, with the surviving inhabitants forced to seek refuge in the forests. Many survived on roots and fruit. Many died of illness and starvation. Incredibly harrowing stories are told by Salvationists, including officers, who were caught up in these events.

THQ COMPOUND IN BRAZZAVILLE

The THQ compound in Brazzaville was invaded by militia, who forced out the officers and their families at gunpoint and took all they possessed, down to the window-frames and door-frames and toilet fittings.

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National and expatriate officers and their families walked a nightmare journey seeking some kind of sanctuary, without food or drink, stepping over corpses, dodging militia groups, supporting and encouraging one another until they found haven in a corps which the tide of horror and destruction seemed to have left untouched.

Visiting this harrowed country in November 2001, we saw the expected signs of damage and destruction. Some friends we had left at our last visit three years ago were no longer there, among them an outstanding officer tragically martyred in the cause of peace.

From some family groups the parents were missing. Others had lost children. Many folk were thinner, looking older. There were the marks of strain. But there were other marks, more subtle but deeper and enduring; the marks of those who had come through tribulation with courage and faith and the presence of God.

You might expect some despondency, perhaps even despair.

Certainly there was still a deep sadness in many hearts, for their country, for lost family members and friends, for shattered lives around them. But pervading all was a glowing spirit of hope and courage and—yes—joy! A pulsing and contagious spiritual vitality that was awe-inspiring.

A GROWING ARMY

The Army is vital and growing. In our first meeting (lasting close to four hours), the congregation numbered thousands, 134 soldiers were enrolled and the inauguration of a new corps was announced.

In the second, 300 miles away, the stone laying for a new hall saw the enrollment of another 12 soldiers. At another corps the next day, 28 more soldiers were enrolled and a large number of new recruits recognized.

Six more outposts in the area, some faithfully shepherded by officers and local officers caring for their people in the forests, were ready to become corps.

While we were there, the TC flew to a point further north than the Army had reached before, to an area of rivers and forests and gorillas, where the authorities of the region had invited the Army to consolidate its ministry in a key center of human habitation.

SPIRIT OF JESUS

Across the country, buildings have been repaired, facilities restored, the stripped and looted THQ reopened, a new clinic built and put into operation, schools and day-care centers reopened and new ones established...and the witness and caring of the Army through its Salvationists is breathing life into every community they touch.

There is still much to be done. Conditions are poor; hardship a regular companion; and setbacks not unknown. But the spirit of the Army in Congo is vibrant, for it is the Spirit of Jesus.

In the Officers' Training College, 12 Crossbearers are preparing to be commissioned. The wars prevented the college from receiving cadets for a period of some three years, and selected candidates were placed in corps as leaders to see them through the time of conflict. These are the Crossbearers, now completing their residential training, and ready to bring their confidence in God's leading and grace, forged in a fierce furnace, into lifetime service as commissioned officers.

FLAGS CARRIED HIGH

The emphasis on spiritual life and growth is strong, and was evidenced keenly in two 5-day Brengle Institutes for officers held in November. Testimonies were deeply moving, fellowship precious, and the eagerness to go deeply into all God had for them quite overwhelming.

Officers, national and expatriates, robbed and driven out at gunpoint—in some cases twice—are back at their posts. Soldiers who have come through incredible trauma resume their roles in corps and community. Bands and timbrels play, choirs, junior singers, worship groups sing with abandon. Uniforms are worn proudly and flags carried high, and light, hope and compassion are spread abroad.

Though we pray continually for peace and progress in the Congo nation, we can't predict how that might come. But we are fully confident that the spirit of Jesus, shown in and through the Congo's Salvationists, will endure and conquer and heal and save as long as God's men and women and children walk that land.