

Africa's First World War

Five years after the fall of President Mobutu Sese Seko, the nation of Congo struggles with the aftermath of a war that has killed more than 2 million people. | BOB SMIETANA

When King Louis XV ruled France, he predicted disaster for the country after his death. “Après moi, le deluge,” he reportedly said—“After me, the flood.” And within twenty years of his passing (in 1774), his son Louis XVI would be guillotined during the French Revolution.

President Mobutu Sese Seko, who ruled the Congo (then Zaire) for more than thirty years, also predicted the downfall of his country, says Alden Almquist. “He was fond of saying, ‘After me, the flood,’” says Almquist, who lived in Congo for thirteen years. Almquist, whose parents were Covenant missionaries, has worked as an Africa researcher for the Library of Congress, taught Africa-bound diplomats at the Foreign Service Institute, and writes extensively on Congo.

“Mobutu kept the peace,” says Almquist, “when there were civil wars all over the continent in places like Angola and Sudan. He also impover-

ished and wrecked the country.”

To prevent any opposition, Mobutu made all the country's institutions subject to his personal rule. He also set up a number of independent military groups, says Almquist, pitting one against the others. (Mobutu also stole several billion dollars from the national treasury.) As a result, the only way to get anything done was to be directly connected with Mobutu. And when Mobutu was driven from power in 1997, there was chaos.

“When everything is centered in one person, and that person goes away,” says Almquist, “there is nothing to hold the country together.”

Mobutu's hold on power began to disintegrate in 1991, following a series of riots in Kinshasa by unpaid soldiers. (The unrest caused the evacuation of Covenant missionaries.) He was often absent from the country in the 1990s, receiving cancer treatments abroad, and was toppled in May 1997 by rebels

led by Laurent Kabila. Mobutu died in Morocco that September.

The country is currently controlled by three groups. The official government, backed by troops from Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia, is led by Joseph Kabila (his father, Laurent, was assassinated in 2001) and controls the west, including the capital city of Kinshasa. The Ugandan-backed Congolese Liberation Movement (MLC), led by Jean-Pierre Bemba, controls the northern section of the country, including the Ubangi region where the Covenant Church of Congo (CEUM) is located. The Rwandan-backed Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) controls the eastern section of the country.

According to the International Rescue Committee (www.theirc.org), more than 2.5 million people in Congo have died in the last five years, most from violence, starvation, and disease caused by fighting between rebel groups. Diplomats call the conflict

Timeline of Covenant Missions in Congo

1881 Mission Covenant Church of Sweden sends its first representatives to the Congo.

1927 P. A. Westlind of Swedish Covenant Mission to Congo visits Covenant churches in North America, creating interest in the work there.

1930 Covenant Annual Meeting authorizes the Board of Foreign Missions “to study the possibility of beginning missionary work in South America or Africa.”

1934 The Board of Foreign Missions recommends calling doctor Wallace Thornbloom, nurses Sarah Westerfield and Florence Nelson, and evangelist Axel Bellander, for missionary work in Congo.



Early Covenant missionaries to Congo

1935 Covenant missionaries arrive in Matadi to work with the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden.

1937 Upon the invitation of the Free Church, the Covenant Church takes over the work at the Karawa mission station, which was begun by Free Church mission-

ary Dr. Titus Johnson in 1923.

1940 Missionaries begin work in Gbado, focusing on evangelism, education, and medicine.

1947 Missionaries begin evangelistic work in Bokada.

1950 A site is secured in Wasolo to begin a mission station.

1960 Missionaries are evacuated during the volatile months following Congo's independence from Belgium.

1964 In September, missionaries evacuate during a rebellion. After taking his family to safety, Covenant missionary Dr. Paul E. Carlson returns to Congo to care for his patients. He is taken prisoner by Congo rebels, accused of being a U.S. spy, and sentenced to death. In November, as gov-

“Africa’s First World War.” Complicating matters are thousands of Hutu militia in refugee camps in Congo, who fled Rwanda after being involved in the murders of over 500,000 members of the Tutsi tribe there. Local militia groups, like the Mai Mai, have also terrorized local communities, killing anyone who gets in their way. Low level fighting has continued, despite a ceasefire known as the Lusaka Accord, signed in 1999. Negotiations for a permanent peace plan, known as the inter-Congolese dialogue, broke down in mid-

continued because the outside nations involved in the conflict have benefited from the war in Congo. “Those players have an economic interest in keeping the war going,” says Almquist, “so they can export gold, coltan [used in circuit boards for cell phones and laptops], diamonds, coffee, and timber. It’s cheaper to send in small amounts of arms and ammunition to keep local proxies fighting than to build institutions to control their areas.”

If there was a peace agreement with all parties, the supplies of arms and

success,” Almquist says. “All other attempts to start Western institutions in Africa have failed. The church is still growing in the midst of AIDS, economic collapse, and warfare.”

Those who want to help the church in Congo can get involved in practical matters like providing blackboards and other supplies for schools or medical supplies for hospitals.

Almquist noted a story that he read soon after ABC’s *Nightline* focused on Congo last fall, about a Congolese family who had taken in six refugees. “They

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April, with no comprehensive agreements.

Leaders of the MLC and the national government did reach a partial agreement, with President Kabila retaining power and the MLC’s Bemba becoming prime minister, but the plan has not been implemented yet. The RCD has dismissed the plan as “a joke,” according to the United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network. The plan may result in new fighting between the RCD and the government.

Almquist says that the fighting has

funding to local groups would be cut off. “They need arms and ammunition to keep the fighting going,” Almquist says. “The war wouldn’t stop all at once—but it would grind down. But that’s not in the interests of the foreign sponsors of this war.”

Almquist urged Covenanters and other Christians not to lose hope, despite the hardships in the Congo. The nation of Congo may have failed, and the economy of the country may have failed, he says, but the church has not failed. “The church in Africa is a

eventually took in twenty, even though they didn’t have enough food to feed everyone.”

“There is incredible hospitality in the Congo, and there are signs of hope and incredible resilience that could sustain them,” says Almquist. “That’s why people keep coming back, crisis after crisis. They keep coming back in the face of hardships that would make most Americans give up. People need to look at that in spite of the trouble.” □

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ernment troops advance, Carlson is shot and killed.

1970 The Covenant Church and the Free Church surrender their charter to work in northwest Congo to the Congolese, who then establish two churches—the Church of Christ in the Ubangi, which will work with the Free Church, and the Evangelical Church of Ubangi/Mongala (CEUM), which will work with the Covenant Church.

1972 President Mobutu Sese Seko changes the country’s name from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Zaire.

1991 In September the entire missionary staff in the Ubangi is evacuated (85 adults and children) following rioting in

Kinshasa. The CEUM has more than 100,000 members.

1992 Covenant missionaries return to Zaire, but not as many as had left.



Dr. Paul Carlson

1996-97 In December 1996, due to political unrest, Covenant missionaries begin to evacuate, reducing missionary staff by half. In January 1997, the rest of the missionaries leave (53 in all). On May 16, Zaire’s president of thirty-two years, Mobutu Sese Seko, resigns and goes into exile. Zaire is renamed Democratic Republic of Congo by its new president, Laurent Kabila. The CEUM has grown to more than 136,000 members.

1998 Civil war breaks out between the government and rebel groups backed by Uganda and Rwanda. The war includes troops from Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe.

1999 A peace agreement is signed between the government and two main rebel groups, the Congolese Liberation Movement (MLC) and the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD). Despite the peace accord, fighting continues over the next three years. The MLC retains control over the northern section of the country where the CEUM is located.

2001 President Laurent Kabila is assassinated and succeeded by his son Joseph.

2002 With more than 150,000 members, the CEUM continues to grow despite years of civil war and economic deprivation and hardship.