

### Introduction

**A**t the heart of the African tropics, the Democratic Republic of Congo (D R Congo), formerly Zaire, is a land of endless rainforest, abundant wildlife and enormous mineral wealth. Known as the 'Amazon of Africa' it is a country torn apart by one of the bloodiest wars since World War II and is a nation struggling to rebuild itself after more than a century of injustice.



### History

Congo's earliest inhabitants were the Pygmies who were displaced between 2000 BC and 500 AD by Bantu migrations.

Europeans first arrived in Kongo in 1482 but it was only in the 1870s that European penetration took place in earnest through H M Stanley, whose mapping of the area prepared the region for colonisation.

Over a decade later, in 1885, Congo was given to King Leopold II of Belgium. Leopold's Congo Free State was responsible for the deaths of about ten million Congolese who died as a result of exploitation and disease. Moreover, Congolese slaves built several buildings in Belgium and made a fortune for Leopold through the exchange of rubber. International condemnation pressurised the Belgian parliament in 1908 to forcibly remove the Free State from the king and rename it the Belgian Congo. However, the Congolese saw little change in how they were treated.

The country gained its political independence in 1960 after a decade of political struggle. After five years of instability, political infighting and civil unrest, General Mobutu, commander of the army, assumed power. He imposed a strong central government and one-party State. In 1971 D R Congo he renamed the country and river Zaire, renamed himself Mobutu Sese Seko, banned foreign influences and took over church educational establishments. With the end of the

Cold War, Mobutu, originally seen as a necessary ally by the USA and supported accordingly, became an embarrassment to Western powers because of human rights abuses and corruption.

In 1997, Laurent Kabila, an exiled politician backed by Rwandan and Ugandan troops, advanced across the country. The Mobutu regime fled into exile and the Democratic Republic of Congo was established. Stability was short-lived. A new rebellion followed, the alliance with Rwanda and Uganda ended and by 1999 rebel forces from these neighbouring countries occupied nearly 50 per cent of the country. In 2001 Kabila was assassinated and his son, Joseph, took control.

Two years later Joseph Kabila managed to negotiate a fragile peace and put together an interim government made up of former rebel leaders, opposition politicians and Kabila loyalists. However, sporadic violence still exists and the government has no control over large parts of the country.

### Current challenges

- ▶ Despite the 2003 peace deal the threat of civil war remains. The last conflict took three million lives, mostly civilian, and destroyed much of the country's infrastructure.
- ▶ Congo is abundantly rich in minerals. However, conflict, corruption and instability has meant that the country's economy is in virtual collapse.
- ▶ The World Food Programme estimates that 80 per cent of the population has no access to safe water.

### BMS involvement in D R Congo

There has been BMS work in D R Congo for over 100 years. With the Baptist Church of the River Congo (CBFC), BMS World Mission sends mission personnel, equipment and funding. BMS also makes annual grants to medical work, theological training, evangelism and church planting, and relief grants from time to time. Before an evacuation of workers during the early 1990s there were around 70 BMS personnel in Congo – today there are just a handful. BMS World Mission is involved in the following projects:

## Education

Pat Woolhouse is BMS' deputy headteacher at the Christian School in Kimpese.

## Development projects

Kevin Jones is supporting national church and community development projects.

## HIV

Gill Jones, a BMS nurse, is working in community health focusing particularly on HIV with the Vorsi-Congo organisation.

## Background information

### The land

D R Congo is situated in the central-west part of sub-Saharan Africa, one-third north and two-thirds south of the equator. The flat basin of the Congo River system, covered by tropical rainforest, is framed by hilly grassland to the west, high mountains to the east and south east, and substantial plateaus to the south and north.

Due to its equatorial location, rainfall is extremely high, which has helped create and sustain the massive rainforest found in the huge low-lying central basin of the river. The tropical climate has also helped establish the Congo River system, the second longest river in Africa, which is vital to the economic survival and transportation of the Congolese.

Congo is a land of great mineral wealth – wealth that has often been at the heart of much exploitation. The Congolese have yet to see the financial benefit of their country's rich mineral resources.

## Religion

In 1972 the President ruled that freedom of religious worship would be assured within the framework of six legally recognised religious bodies – Roman Catholic (the largest), Protestant (ECC), Kimbanguist, Orthodox, Jewish and Muslim.

At present 95 per cent of the population claim Christianity as their religion but this number is probably not accurate due to the high levels of religious syncretism.

There are about 1.5 million members of Baptist churches in Congo – the fifth highest Baptist population in the world. These members form part of the 2,626 registered Baptist churches that give rise to nine Baptist Unions and Associations. Of these churches, 1,085 belong to the largest union,

the CBFC, in an area that was first evangelised by mission workers from BMS in the 1880s.

## Prayer points

- ▶ The history of Congo is marked by corruption, injustice, exploitation and war. Pray for churches at the heart of local communities to be examples of integrity, acceptance, generosity, forgiveness and love.
- ▶ Congo has seemingly insurmountable obstacles to overcome, including tackling growing HIV infections. Pray for the government as it begins to rebuild the country economically, socially and politically.
- ▶ Pray for the peace of God to fill the nation and bring healing after decades of abuse and pain. Pray particularly for the peace of Christ to herald a new era of justice and peace in this country so desperate for change.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

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