

You are not alone.

Agony out of Africa

Reflections on war and terror in the Congo by Nzash Lumeya

THE KUDILA family prayed for a taxi-mini bus.

They led a mission committee in a local Mennonite Brethren church in Kinshasa, the capital city of seven million in Congo. They bought a VW mini-bus from Belgium and drove it to my house. They wanted to praise the Lord for it and beg him to protect it. They had decided to give monthly support to God's mission out of the income generated through their endeavor. Together, we asked the Lord to be their helper.

That was before August 1998, before the war broke out. In the early days of the war, Kudila's children were killed and the mini-bus was destroyed. I had the radio on that day. International radio broadcasts invited millions of Kinshasa's population to cross the Congo river to reach safe camps prepared by the UN. These announcements troubled the whole city. In need of comforting news, I turned my radio to the local station. They gave more details confirming that Kinshasa was indeed being terrorized. Foreign soldiers shelled the city. The invaders tried to take and control the airport by force, but they were fought back.

During this heavy battle in and around Kinshasa, Kudila's house was destroyed. His VW mini-bus was confiscated and his children killed. While Kudila escaped death, he is traumatized and still asks many questions.

Where was God- Why did he let that happen? Is he listening to the voices of his people in Congo who live in the midst of war and cry out for peace?

A land of war

The Democratic Republic of Congo is the third largest African country-home to the largest Mennonite Brethren and the second largest Mennonite population in the world. Since 1990, the Congolese MB Conference has increased its cross-cultural evangelists from four to 20 people. Pygmy MBs are the newcomers in this family of God. Kinshasa is home to the 8,000 Mennonite Brethren of the Kimbanseke MB district, who worship in 20 local churches in Lingala, French and Arabic.

But Congo is unjustly crippled. We are intimate with war, conflict and exploitation. We have endured it for over a century. Since 1885, Congolese people had no input in their economical and political destiny. The price of our resources-rubber, diamonds, gold, tea and cotton-is marked by the customer rather than the seller.

In 1885, the major European powers carved up Africa and created the Congo Free State, one of the most brutal and exploitative of all African colonial regimes. Congo remained a Belgian colony until June 1960, when the region gained independence and was renamed the Democratic Republic of Congo.

But the country collapsed into disorder a few months after gaining independence, and Mobutu Sese Seko seized power in a military coup, naming himself president in 1965. In 1971, Mobutu changed the name of the region to Zaire, and for the next two decades he ruled as a dictator. During that time, Zaire was a pawn in the Cold War. Mobutu was supported by Western powers, who saw him as a counterbalance to the Soviet influence in the region. But under Mobutu's rule, the economy disintegrated as public funds were diverted into his private bank accounts.

In 1994, 1.3 million refugees fled to camps in eastern Zaire after war broke out in neighboring Rwanda. In 1996, a wider anti-Mobutu opposition took over the country. A year later, Laurent-Desire Kabila turned the country inside out.

Imagine what would happen if we all took seriously God's call to peace. Each of the six African countries with armies in the Congo is more than 70 percent Christian. Congo is more than 95 percent Christian. If each Christian citizen of these seven countries took the great commandment seriously—to love the Lord with all one's heart, soul and mind and love one's neighbor as oneself—the Mennonite Brethren family of Kudu could reap the result of love in Christ. Christian oneness not only could have saved Kudu's VW mini-bus from destruction but saved his children from unnecessary death.

- Prayer and advocacy are needed on behalf of Congo in order to further God's Kingdom in Congo and abroad. Inter-dependency in God's mission remains the core of our obedience as members of the global body of Christ in this third millennium.

You are not alone

As a global family, we have the blessing of sharing our struggles with each other. Sept. 11 was felt in Congo. African Mennonite Brethren are in sympathy with you. Days and nights have been offered in prayers for guidance and discernment. Our prayer for you is that you would know "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Cor. 1: 3b-4) .•

At the time this was written Nzash Lumeya was an associate professor in world missions at the MB Biblical Seminary in Fresno, Calif., and a missionary consultant with MBMS International, the global mission agency of North American MB churches.

A letter from the Congo by Mesach Krisetya and Larry Miller

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We greet each of you in the name of Jesus Christ and on behalf of the worldwide family of faith. Before leaving the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where we are now on a pastoral visit to Mennonite World Conference member churches, we received messages of condolence and concern for your welfare from various parts of the world. In every place we visit, the first questions asked are about you and your faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

The letter to the Hebrews speaks of "a great cloud of witnesses." As we write this letter, we are surrounded by members and leaders of the Mennonite churches of the Congo. Together with them, we bear witness to you that you, too, are surrounded by a great cloud of brothers and sisters.

From the moment of the first news of the tragic events of Sept. 11 and during the difficult weeks since then, the worldwide family of faith has been holding you up in heart-felt prayer. We traveled through restricted areas in the Congo, where Mennonites and their compatriots have been suffering under the love and fervent prayers.

More than 84,000 MBs and their families, including these children, live in the Congo. In Angola, there are 4,600 more.

These same sisters and brothers also ask if you are keeping your eyes fixed on Jesus Christ. From their own life situation, they know the effects of war, economic collapse, political crisis and more than two million deaths. Expressions of grief and solidarity with Americans and with you in particular are prominent in nearly every meeting and worship service. Those we meet ask us to assure you of their fraternal love now face heavy pressure and high obstacles as you seek to follow and bear witness to the Savior, who loves enemies. They believe a warlike response to the Sept. 11 violence will harm many people and impede Christian witness around the world, directly or indirectly, including here in Africa.

They encourage you to seek a message from God amidst the present events and to seize this opportunity to reinforce your proclamation of the gospel of peace, as they have tried to do during the war years in the Congo. We have reported that you are focusing on the Prince of Peace and that you are searching for ways to promote his ways. They will continue to follow your decisions and actions, surrounding you continually with prayer.

May God give you the strength to run with perseverance the race marked out for you. Keep the faith! •

Mesach Krisetya, president of Mennonite World Conference, lives in Indonesia. Larry Miller, executive secretary of Mennonite World Conference, lives in France. Adapted from a letter to members and heads of U.S. Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches written from the Congo, Oct. 7, 2001.