

## **Africa: A Troubled Continent (11)**

### **The Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire): A Perpetual War Zone (2)**

In June 1960 the Belgians hastily granted independence to a woefully unprepared people. Patrice Lumumba (1925-61), a former student at a Protestant mission school, founder and leader of the Congolese National Movement, became prime minister. At independence, Lumumba told Belgium's King Baudouin I, "From today we are no longer your monkeys!" Lumumba demanded Belgians to leave immediately. Thousands began packing. Within days most of the civil servants who had held the government together were gone. With the sudden departure of the Belgians the infant nation was bereft of its efficient colonial infrastructure that had held the Congo together, and was reeling toward a catastrophe. The country plunged into disorder. Tribal, factional and regional war followed fanned by the intervention of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces. The resentment of the population against the Belgians flared into attacks, murder and rape. Lumumba's regime did not last long. After he was deposed in 1960, he was assassinated in 1961, becoming a national hero. Soviet propaganda turned him into a martyr for Congolese freedom. A university was named after him and his supporters were offered "scholarships" to study in the Soviet Union.

### **The Cold War**

On the whole, Africa is economically in a worse position than at the time of independence. Tribal quarrels and difference did not disappear. It became a victim of the struggle for power between the great powers. During the cold war, Marxist ideology as well as funding from the Soviet Union began playing a role in African conflicts. Lumumba asked for Communist military aid and the Soviets and the Czechs immediately sent planes and trucks. Angered by Lumumba's deal with the Communists, President Kasavubu dismissed him as premier. When Lumumba refused to resign, General Mobutu took over the command of the tattered army.

Moise Tshombe (1919-69) became president of the province of Katanga and declared it independent. The UN sent troops to Katanga. But some of the UN troops were as undisciplined as the Congolese. They raped European women, fired on ambulances, and bombarded a hospital marked with Red Cross flags. Tshombe escaped to Spain. In a surprising switch of events, he was recalled and became Congo's prime minister in 1964, but was later deposed. He was kidnapped and taken to Algeria where he died in custody. The political disturbances and constant strife had disastrous consequences for the economy. Furthermore, the central government was fast losing control over its army. And there was increasingly discontent in the country.

### **Sese Seko Mobutu (1930-97)**

Mobutu was a commander in the Belgian army at the age of 30 with the rank of colonel. In 1958 he joined Lumumba's political movement. In 1960 in an attempt to stop Congo's

slide toward anarchy, he took command of the tattered army. Five months later he handed back power to a civilian government. After the civil war of 1963-65, a military coup brought him again to power. This time he was to stay as a virtual dictator for nearly 30 years. He treated the country as his personal fiefdom. His regime was corrupt and run by kleptomaniacs.

Mobutu and his cronies used the finances of the country as their private purse, and drove the Congolese to despair. This shameless action was apparently condoned by the West because of Mobutu's support in the Cold War. After 1971 Congo joined the list of one-party nations. As leader of the Movement Populaire de la Revolution (MPR), Mobutu became head of state. The collapse of communism brought pressure to reform and democratize, but Mobutu successfully manipulated, bribed and suppressed efforts to dislodge him from power.

In 1971 Mobutu launched an Africanization crusade, which he called a policy of "authenticity." His policy wanted to turn the clock back and return to its African origins, especially changing many names, both geographical and personal. He changed his country's name to Zaire, and renamed cities which had been named for Europeans, Leopoldville became Kinshasa and Stanleyville was changed to Kisangani. He took for himself the tribal name Mobutu Sese Seko, dropping his baptismal name "Joseph Desire." He ordered all Congolese to follow his example and abandon their baptismal names. One reason for Mobutu's edict was his opposition to the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), which had criticized his government's abuses. Even so, Mobutu also favoured rival Christian groups whom he saw as more docile and nationalist-minded than the Catholics, namely Protestants and Kimbanguists.

In the early 1990s constitutional talks were held. In 1993 they were at a stalemate and confrontation between the President with his well-armed presidential guard, and the Prime Minister, brought chaos, rioting, anarchy and a virtual cessation of trade. Mobutu was forced to stand down in May 1997, following an uprising led by Laurent Kabila Kimbanguism.

In view of the rapid spread of Christianity in the Belgian Congo, it is no surprise that indigenous religious movements sprang up which had elements of Christian origin. Thus, in 1921 the African "prophetic movement" arose. It began with Simon Kimbangu, a Baptist, who believed that he had a Divine commission to undertake a ministry of healing. The report that his touch could heal the sick spread like a wildfire. Mission hospitals were deserted. Thousands of Protestants and RCs brought their sick to be touched. Even the dead were brought. At first Kimbangu preached the Christian message as he had heard it in the Baptist church. Fetishes and charms were discarded, and the polygamous put away all their wives but one. Many people purchased Bibles and song books. However, within a short time the people gathered around Kimbangu began to introduce superstitions and practices from their traditional religion until Kambanguism of Congo became a mixture of Christianity and traditional religions.

Kimbangu's popularity attracted opposition from the RCs, whose churches were rapidly losing members. The RCs requested the state officials to intervene. In September 1921 the Belgian government arrested Kimbangu and planned to put him to death, but a group of missionaries wrote to King Albert of Belgium in his defense. The king reversed the sentence. Kimbangu, who lived an exemplary life throughout his ordeal, died in prison in 1951. After 1950 the Belgian authorities relinquished the persecution of the EJCSK, and the movement began to grow rapidly. The request for legal recognition was not granted until 1959. Since 1963 they received subsidies from the government for their schools just as did the Protestants and the RC.

The theology of the EJCSK seeks the continuity of the Christian present with the traditional African past. When Kambanguism revived in 1959, its leaders held Kimbangu to be the Messiah of the Negroes, as Christ, so they said, was the Savior of the whites. They sought to make their movement the only true national church. They insisted that the teachings of Kimbangu were essentially those of Christ, but adapted to the needs of the Africans. Their Catechism honors him in much the same way as the Holy Spirit is honored. The communion service was not observed until the 50th anniversary of the movement. It was introduced with great solemnity. We should note though that the sacraments never have been a prominent feature of many African independent churches. It is also true that they have no prominence in African Christianity as a whole. In his book *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Andrew F. Walls claims that this results from "the fact that the mission churches, Catholic and Protestant, have insisted on the practice of their countries of origin, that only a priest or a minister is permitted to officiate at the sacrament, and there have never been enough of these to make sacramental worship more than a periodic experience for most African Christians."

Today the EJCSK is large. During Mobutu's regime only three churches were recognized: The Eglise du Christ du Zaïre (ECZ), the Roman Catholic Church, and the EJCSK. The latter never joined with the ECZ, but it became a member of the World Council of Churches in 1968.

## **Martyrdom**

The Church experienced traumatic years immediately following independence, and especially during "the Rebellion" of 1963-65. Both times the Church was targeted by antigovernment forces as well as opportunist gangs. The Communist-inspired rebels, who called themselves Simbas (lions), were cruel and ruthless beyond measure. "We will make our fetishes with the hearts of the Americans and the Belgians, and we will clothe ourselves in their skins," said Christophe Gbeyne, president of the rebel forces that in 1964 took over Stanleyville. This was no idle threat. The Simbas terrorized hundreds of villages. In one hamlet they shot every man who was not wearing a loincloth. More typically they would pick out one man and shoot him as an example of what would happen to anyone who did not give them aid.

Before the rebellion was over tens of thousands of Congolese had fallen before the Simbas' spears, arrows, and guns. Hundreds of foreigners lost their lives. Many hundreds of national believers were put to death. Pastors, evangelists, and teachers were killed because their Christian principles did not condone the inhumane cruelties and immorality of the rebels. The latter saw many educated Christians as a threat. The Unevangelized Fields Mission sustained the loss of 19 of its 30 missionaries and children. The RC losses were considerable greater losing 179 workers during this period.

One of the slain missionaries was young Dr. Paul Carlson, who served with his wife Lois at an Evangelical Covenant Church hospital in northern Congo. Their station was called "the forgotten corner" because it was so remote. Rebel propaganda had made the mild, unassuming missionary medic a monster in the minds of the Congolese people. He was shot and killed while trying to assist in the escape of a missionary colleague. The inspiring story of his capture and martyrdom is told by his wife Lois in *Monganga Paul: The Congo Ministry of Paul Carlson, M.D.* Dr. Carlson's stirring call to obedient Christian service has not lost its relevance: "My friends, if today you are not willing to suffer for Jesus, do not partake of the elements.... To follow Jesus means to be willing to suffer for Him."

The destructive-murderous rebellion left a trail of untold misery. In some regions the activities of the church ceased for about 18 months. When order was restored, some churches were unable to resume their activities because so many church workers had been killed. It was some time before they were able to reestablish their ministries. The destruction of schools, dispensaries, hospitals, the printing establishments, and church buildings disrupted the activities of some churches. Yet the Church's journey through the dark night of persecution had an unexpected outcome. It resulted in a deepening spiritual life and maturity of the remaining national leaders who learned how to stand without missionary assistance.

## **Conclusion**

The future of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) looks bleak. Peace, short of Christ's return, will not come soon. By the early 1990s the DRC was among the poorest of the nations. Many people resorted to barter to survive. Persistent conflict, lawlessness, greed for power among political leaders, violence, low levels of education, and widespread infectious diseases are huge stumbling blocks hindering progress. Throughout its turbulent history in the DRC the Church has been able to ride the storm. But the challenges for an effective ministry are greater than ever. There have been several temporary evacuations of missionaries since 1991. Nominalism and formalism within the church, secularism, and proliferation of sects without make ministry and witness difficult.

Although the DRC seldom makes the headlines, Christians in the West must not forget their fellow Congolese brothers and sisters in Christ with their Word and deed ministry and prayer.

Johan D. Tangelder