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Congo's tragedy: the war the world forgot

In a country the size of Western Europe, a war rages that has lasted eight years and cost four million lives. Rival militias inflict appalling suffering on the civilian population, and what passes for political leadership is powerless to stop it. This is Congo, and the reason for the conflict - control of minerals essential to the electronic gadgetry on which the developed world depends - is what makes our blindness to the horror doubly shaming. Johann Hari reports from the killing fields of central Africa

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This is the story of the deadliest war since Adolf Hitler's armies marched across Europe - a war that has not ended. But is also the story of a trail of blood that leads directly to you: to your remote control, to your mobile phone, to your laptop and to your diamond necklace. In the TV series *Lost*, a group of plane crash survivors believe they are stranded alone on a desert island, until one day they discover a dense metal cable leading out into the ocean and the world beyond. The Democratic Republic of Congo is full of those cables, mysterious connections that show how a seemingly isolated tribal war is in reality something very different.

This war has been dismissed as an internal African implosion. In reality it is a battle for coltan, diamonds, cassiterite and gold, destined for sale in London, New York and Paris. It is a battle for the metals that make our technological society vibrate and ring and bling, and it has already claimed four million lives in five years and broken a population the size of Britain's. No, this is not only a story about them. This - the tale of a short journey into the long Congolese war we in the West have fostered, fuelled and funded - is a story about you.

I Rapes Within Rapes

It starts with a ward full of women who have been gang-raped and then shot in the vagina. I am standing in a makeshift ward in the Panzi hospital in Bukavu, the only hospital that is trying to deal with the bushfire of sexual violence in eastern Congo. Most have wrapped themselves deep in their blankets so I can only see their eyes staring blankly at me. Dr Denis Mukwege is speaking. "Around 10 per cent of the gang-rape victims have had this happen to them," he says softly, his big hands tucked into his white coat. "We are trying to reconstruct their vaginas, their anuses, their intestines. It is a long process."

We walk out into the courtyard and he begins to explain - in the national language, French - the secret history of this hospital. "We started with a catastrophe we just couldn't understand," he says softly. One day early in the war, the Unicef medical van he was using was looted. Coincidentally, a few days later, a woman was carried here on her grandmother's back after an eight-hour trek. "I had never seen anything like it. She had been gang-raped and then her legs had been shot to pieces. I operated on her on a table with no equipment, no medicine."

She was only the first. "We suddenly had so many women coming in with post-rape lesions and injuries I could never have imagined. Our minds just couldn't take in what these women had suffered." The competing armies had discovered that rape was an efficient weapon in this war. Even in this small province, South Kivu, the UN estimates that 45,000 women were raped

last year alone. "It destroys the morale of the men to rape their women. Crippling their women cripples their society," he explains, shaking his head gently. There were so many militias around that Dr Mukwege had to keep his treatments secret - the women were terrified of being kidnapped again and killed. He became an Oskar Schindler of the Congolese mass rapes.

As we walk down to watch 200 rape victims being taught to sew under a large, dark bridge, he tells me what they can expect now. "When the rapes begin, the husbands and fathers often just scarp and never come back. The women never hear anything from them again. Other times, the men blame the women and shun them. It's very hard for us to persuade the women to leave the hospital, because where are they going to go?"

He introduces me to Aileen, who is 18 but looks much younger. She holds her hands tightly in her lap. Her story is stark, the details sparse. Her village was raided by a militia on 10 October, and "they beheaded people in the central square". Her voice is high-pitched; she is almost squeaking. She was seized and taken back out into the forest by the militia where they kept her for six months. "I was raped every night. The first night my body really ached and hurt because I was a virgin," she says. She would be passed on from one man to the next. It is only as she speaks that I notice the large protruding bump sagging into her lap. The baby is going to be born next month. She says she has spoken to her family, but Dr Mukwege tells me later this is a fantasy. "What," she asks me with wide eyes as we leave, "do you think I should do? Where can I go?"

It is coldly appropriate to start here. The rape of Aileen and the rape of the thousands of women who stagger into the Panzi hospital are, I soon discover, merely part of a larger rape - the rape of Congo.

II The Last of the Belgian Colonialists

Bukavu is a cratered, shattered shack-city in eastern Congo that lies on the edge of Lake Kivu. In the street markets, people trade scraps of food for Congolese notes worth a few pence. In the houses, they stagger along without water or electricity. Wandering through this cacophony, I find a lone white woman, a lingering remnant of the origins of this war. She can reveal how all this began.

As we sit over lunch, Tina Van Malderen says, skimming the menu: "I don't drink water - only wine." Her hair is greying but her smile is warm. "I came to Bukavu as a little girl in 1951 when my father came to work for the Belgian administration," she explains. "It was paradise. There were only Europeans then. No Africans. Black people lived in the surrounding areas. It wasn't like South Africa, they weren't forced. They didn't want to live with us. They came into the town to work. They had their own market." She speaks of the days of the Belgian empire with a soft-focus sepia longing. "I have four sisters, and we would swim in the lake all day. It was like a non-stop holiday."

Her family owned a chain of shops, and the only castle in Congo. She is incredulous when I ask if there was any cruelty towards black people back then. "Absolutely not. We loved our blacks. When they had children, we gave them gifts." Perhaps sensing my scepticism, she adds: "Maybe on the plantations they were a little bit rude to them." The Belgians unified Congo in the first great holocaust of the 20th century, a programme of slavery and tyranny that killed 13 million people. King Leopold II - bragging about his humanitarian goals, of course - seized Congo and turned it into a slave colony geared to extracting rubber, the coltan and cassiterite of its day. The "natives" who failed to gather enough rubber would have their hands chopped off, with the Belgian administrators receiving and carefully counting hundreds of baskets of hands a day.

This system of forced cultivation continued until the Belgians withdrew in 1960, when Patrice Lumumba became the first and only elected leader of Congo. "He was a stupid man," Tina says swiftly. "On the first day of independence, he said we had beaten and humiliated the blacks. He signed his death warrant by doing that."

She's right - he did. Lumumba claimed to be a democratic socialist who wanted to overcome Congo's ethnic divisions. We will never know if he could have fulfilled this dream, because the CIA decided he was a "mad dog" who had to be put down. Before long, one of its agents was driving around Kinshasa with the elected leader's tortured corpse in the boot, and the CIA's man - Mobutu Sese Seko - was in power and in the money. Tina's family sold their castle to the dictator as he renamed the country Zaire. "People always ask if he paid. Of course he paid!" she laughs. Mobutu became another Leopold, using the state to rob and murder the Congolese people.

Tina's family started to worry in the 1970s when he announced a programme of "Zaireanisation" - a Mugabe-style transfer of the resources of foreigners to his cronies. "My mother arrived at work one day and there was a black man come to take possession of everything, including her car. She had to walk home," Tina says, glugging red wine.

"Everything began to fail after that. The food became disgusting. Even our dog didn't want to eat it." This is Tina's first visit home - she still calls it that - since they fled. "I saw the house we lived in. From outside it still looked nice but when I went inside..." she shakes her head. "The black people cannot live properly. If I had to compare Congo, I must say it hasn't changed at all. They are not naked any more, but they are still savages." Tina's countrymen established the nation-state in the Congo, and they designed it to be a vampire-state. The only change over the decades has been the resource snatched for Western consumption - rubber under the Belgians, diamonds under Mobutu, coltan and cassiterite today. "Cheers," Tina says, downing