



## Women as actors for peace in Central Africa

UUSC currently supports challenging, yet dynamic human rights programs that are amplifying women's efforts in support of peace and reconciliation efforts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi, two nations devastated by war.

### *The Congo*

Our program partners in the eastern Congo work to reinforce the legal, social and economic rights of women and facilitate the political and social participation of women in decision-making. In addition, our partners work to end the recruitment of children into armed groups, to educate communities about both Congolese and international law, and to reintegrate former child soldiers into society.

Congolese partners have traveled to Washington, D.C., for UUSC-supported meetings. They urged U.S. government backing for a 1999 cease-fire accord. Reactivation

of conflict-resolution offers hope, although the road to a just peace will be long.

### *Burundi*

UUSC partners in Burundi are providing significant ways to encourage the full participation of women in peace making and reconstruction efforts in their countries. The work of UUSC partners has brought together Burundian women from all negotiating parties to develop a common vision for peace.



*Orphaned school children in Burundi*

### **The violent legacy of colonialism**

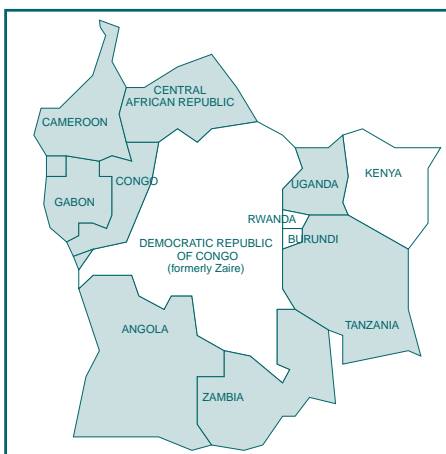
Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo were once colonized by Belgium. Both became independent from Belgium in the 1960s, and the Congo became known as Zaire.

Tutsis are fuelled by a continuing struggle to secure access to scarce economic resources through the control of state power.

The Democratic Republic of Congo was once the home of Belgium's King Leopold II, who claimed the country as his private resource under the name Congo Free State beginning in 1876. It was not until 1908 that Belgium officially took over the country and renamed it the Belgian Congo. Soon after independence in 1960, Patrice Lumumba became prime minister, envisioning a unified Africa. Lumumba was assassinated in 1961. Freedom of Information Act documents and independent research suggest U.S. government implication in Lumumba's death.

U.S. support for the dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko for over 30 years served the twin U.S. interests of

In Burundi, tension between ethnic groups has existed for many years. It is a country with a population of nearly six million people, 85 percent are Hutu and 14 percent are Tutsis, with the Twa comprising only one percent. The dominant group of aristocrats, the Tutsis, have governed this area for centuries. Today, clashes between Hutus and



thwarting communism in Africa during the Cold War and protecting American business interests in the resource rich country. Despite its many serious challenges, an African-led peace process has been moving forward in the Congo since 2000.

## Ethnic violence leads to war in Burundi

Burundi has experienced serious ethnic strife since 1993. It is estimated that over 250,000 people have died since the onslaught of the war between the minority Tutsis and the majority Hutus and hundreds of thousands of refugees have fled to neighboring countries.

Approximately 500,000 Burundians are internally displaced with little access to food, water and shelter. International humanitarian organizations have been unable to provide basic needs to internally displaced peoples due to growing insecurities.

A violent ethnic confrontation in 1993 during which the Tutsi-led army staged a coup resulting in the death of Hutu president Melchior Ndadaye and other senior Hutu members of government was the starting point of Burundi's civil war. In 2000, a peace agreement was signed in Arusha, Tanzania, although some factions declined to participate in the proposed deal.

## Regional conflicts center on the Congo

A massive influx of refugees fleeing fighting in Burundi and the 1994 genocide in neighboring Rwanda seriously complicated the Congo's efforts to build participatory democracy. In addition, given the country's vast natural resources, size and geography, the Congolese conflict increasingly drew in mili-



*UUSC is helping to amplify women's voices for peace-making in Central Africa.*

tary forces from neighboring states, with Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi supporting rebel movements that occupy much of the eastern portion of the country. Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe, in turn, backed the government in the capital city of Kinshasa. Despite official withdrawal of their troops under the peace process, Uganda and Rwanda appear to have continued political and other support for proxies in the Congo.

Warfare since 1998 has claimed over three million lives, primarily through starvation and disease. Some 300,000 Congolese refugees have fled to surrounding countries and over 2.7 million persons are internally displaced.

Grave human rights violations are committed by the various military actors in the war, including Congolese government forces. Women and young girls are raped, sexually exploited, tortured and killed. Families in rural areas sleep outside in bushes, fearing that if they stay in their homes, they will be attacked.

## UUSC partners promote peace in the region

**Promotion and Support for Women's Initiatives (PAIF)** supports women's rights initiatives by raising awareness on the economic, social and political rights of women in the Congo. Located in the eastern Congo, PAIF facilitates the political and social participation of women in decision-making processes in their communities. In 2002, UUSC invited the director of PAIF to the United States to meet with Unitarian Universalist congregations, other U.S.-based social justice groups and policy-makers to press for greater U.S. support for the Congolese peace process.

**People's Group for the Support**

**UUSC partner groups seek ways to bring peace and reconciliation to Africa through the empowerment of people at the grassroots level.**

**and Advancement of Women's and Children's Rights (HADEFE)** is based in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. It defends and promotes the human rights of women and children in this war-torn country. Among the ways in which HADEFE advances human rights is by raising awareness on the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers in eastern Congo.

**People for Peace in Africa (PPA)**, based in Kenya, is one of the leading peace-building organizations in the East Africa region. Their mission is to seek ways to bring peace and reconciliation to Africa through the empowerment of people at the grassroots level. This is achieved by integrating people's religious values with their rich African traditions in peace making and modern ways of mediation. UUSC has supported PPA's peace building and human rights awareness workshops for Burundian women since 1997.

### **Advocacy lets officials know that the U.S. public cares**

Through UUSC's Congo Initiative, over 250 UUSC supporters wrote letters or signed petitions addressed to Secretary of State Colin Powell urging that the U.S. government intensify its diplomacy in support of peace in the Congo. Given their comparatively small numbers, Americans contacting elected officials about Africa can draw attention and prompt action.

## **Prioritizing public policy issues strengthens our UUSC voice and impact**

UUSC prioritizes select public policy issues for concentrated attention. Well-targeted use of our limited resources increases our efficacy and facilitates activism on both high-visibility issues as well as some out-of-the-limelight issues deserving of more advocacy energies. The involvement of UUSC supporters is crucial to influencing decisions by policy-makers.

In addition to collaboration on women's rights, UUSC partner PAIF urges that we accompany them in support of an African-led, United Nations-backed peace process in the Congo. Given its history of support for the Congo dictatorship, the United States has a special responsibility to be an assertive partner in peace-making with the Congolese people. UUSC's recent policy and media advocacy to press the executive branch for effective engagement has included:

- Fall 2002 meetings for the director of PAIF, Immaculée Birhaheka, in Washington, D.C., with foreign policy advisers in Congress and Africa directors in the State Department, as part of a multi-state Africa Peace Tour co-sponsored with the American Friends Service Committee.
- Co-chairing the nongovernmental Congo Working Group of the Advocacy Network for Africa coalition in activities such as successfully calling for congressional hearings on the Congolese peace process.
- Organizing a press breakfast with colleague organizations that resulted in a C-SPAN session on the Congolese peace process aired domestically and abroad.
- Support for government initiatives to expand funding and programs to combat HIV/AIDS, a pandemic that cost some 120,000 Congolese lives in 2001 and will impact health for years.

## Take Action Now

### Action

Write to Secretary of State Colin Powell, U.S. Department of State, 2201 C Street, N.W., Washington, DC, 20050. Mention UUSC in your letter and send copies to your elected officials and UUSC (Kelli Larsen, UUSC, 130 Prospect Street, Cambridge, MA 02139 or [klarsen@uusc.org](mailto:klarsen@uusc.org)).

### Message

Given past United States support for dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, it is our country's special responsibility to be a lead nation in supporting the Congolese peace process and related United Nations efforts. Please intensify our diplomacy by appointing a special envoy to meet with regional governments about peace, as well as offering support for an expanded mandate for MONUC, the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This will signal our commitment to work with the Congolese people for peace and human rights protections.

### Resources

- UUSC: see action alerts and information on the Congo ([www.uusc.org](http://www.uusc.org))
- United Nations/IRIN news service ([www.irinnews.org](http://www.irinnews.org))
- Amnesty International ([www.amnestyusa.org](http://www.amnestyusa.org))
- International Crisis Group ([www.crisisweb.org](http://www.crisisweb.org))
- International Rescue Committee ([www.intrescom.org](http://www.intrescom.org))
- Film "Lumumba: Voice of a Prophet" ([www.zeitgeistfilms.com](http://www.zeitgeistfilms.com))

### About UUSC

With more than 25,000 members and supporters, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is able to create long-term solutions to human rights challenges through a potent combination of social justice advocacy, education and support of community-based partner organizations. UUSC empowers women; supports the struggles of oppressed racial, ethnic and indigenous groups; defends the rights of children; and trains the next generation of social justice advocates. In addition, we provide financial and technical support when disasters strike, especially where human rights are threatened.

Whether working in the United States or internationally, UUSC believes that the best way to bring about and sustain social change is by supporting local leaders and ideas rather than imposing external solutions. While our programs change to meet the current need, UUSC's mission to advance justice and human rights remains constant.



# Unitarian Universalist Service Committee