

Democratic Republic of Congo

The Protest of a People

Memorandum of the march Reggio Emilia-Bruxelles: 29 July 2012



DR Congo, refugees on the march



John Mpaliza on the march



Mosika, a show about DR Congo

Congolese Voices

The Democratic Republic of Congo is a country at war. Since over twenty years, its population has to bear the consequences of a brutal conflict involving systematic human rights abuses as well as a systematic plundering of the country's abundant natural riches. Today its political destiny includes a corrupt and authoritarian government, which remains in power despite evident abuses. Despite many years of international intervention, resources that are fundamental for the growth of Congo's national economy – like copper, gold and colombo-tantalite (coltan) – continue to illegally exit the country without producing benefits for either Congolese workers or civil society at large. At its eastern borders, forced recruitment of children and systematic violence against women have become a common practice since years (see box page 2).

Since the second Congo war (1998-2003) millions of people have died from the indirect consequences of this regional armed conflict, principally from hunger, neglect and disease. The political optimism that has accompanied the country's subsequent political transition and presidential elections (respectively in 2006-7 and 2011) increasingly risk to obscure this continued suffering of Congo's population, however: while donor countries concentrate their efforts on democratization and army reform in the the big cities, the ongoing calamity in Congo's remote borderlands is increasingly covered in an embarrassing and deafening silence.

In front of this silence, a voice of protest is slowly taking shape. The protest march of Congo-in-Europe wants to provide an alternative for the violence and oblivion that characterizes international intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Simultaneously it wants to make a number of concrete propositions in front of Europe's democratic institutions.

The march of Congo-in-Europe rises under the initiative of John Mpaliza, inhabitant of Reggio Emilia (Italy) since 18 years but without European citizenship. John will leave on foot from Reggio Emilia in July 2012 to reach the European capital, walking over 1.600 kilometres during one and a half months, and traversing seven European countries (Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium). The march emerges as a protest against the lack of autonomy and liberty of the Congolese people to choose their own political and socio-economic destiny. It also wants to be a proper response against the systematic violence on an entire people (see list of supporters below).

Historical context

From its colonization at the end of the nineteenth century, the DRC (formerly Zaire, Congo, Congo Free State) has never known peace. In 1885-1908, it was the dominion of a single man, King Leopold II of Belgium: a private enterprise with the sole objective of exploiting the territory's natural resources. Slavery and systematic violence were at the order of the day. After the King's bankruptcy, resulting from a series of megalomaniac projects built with Congo's blood minerals, the country was ceded to the Belgian government. During this period, economic development was concentrated foremost in the mining areas with no durable benefits for ordinary Congolese, who remained subjected to a regime of racial submission and discrimination. Without a proper administrative cadre and educated elite, the country's political and economic independence was jeopardized from the beginning. This situation was aggravated even more with the assassination of its first democratically elected leader, Patrice Eméry Lumumba, by a Belgian and American ordered firing squad. Following Lumumba's death, a brutal dictatorship, led by Desire Mobutu, held the country hostage for over thirty years in a regime of violence and corruption.

After several long wars that have broken the country for many years (respectively 1996-1997 and 1998-2003), shots are fired once more in the east today. As a result of renewed fighting, the long list of deaths by hunger and insecurity risks to grow even longer. To these invisible deaths, one has to add an immense movement of individuals and families who are in perennial flight for war and starvation: first of all within the country (1.7 million in the east according to latest estimates), secondly in the wider region and finally also towards other continents.

Instead of stopping the war, international involvement in the DRC seriously obstructs a durable solution to the crisis.

In front of all this, we expect a minimum of indignation, a minimum of respect for the people who die every day in this violent abyss. Despite the many efforts expressed by development and humanitarian organizations, we observe an embarrassing silence, a hypocrisy from the part of international institutions as well as the media that upsets many Congolese and others in many parts of the world. First of all we are angry at international organizations, which prefer to sustain a corrupt and authoritarian regime instead of openly denouncing the imbroglio that systematically impedes the Great Lakes region to become truly democratic. But we also denounce the governments that are supporting Congo's transition process: rather than opening the way to a democratic culture, the international intervention has given power to warlords who continue to accumulate profit and impose their arbitrary rule on the Congolese population. Instead of stopping the war, international involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo has only increased the level of violence and popular suffering to the extent that it is now seriously obstructing a durable solution to the crisis.

Unending violence

In the DRC recruiting children has become common practice for militias like regular armies. Children often have to prove their allegiance to armed groups by attacking their proper villages, cut family ties or even assassinate members of their kin.

As traumatizing is the faith of children who end up as sexual slaves of armed actors. These children suffer physical and psychological traumas that are difficult to overcome after demobilization. Because of the horrendous acts committed during wartime, child soldiers often live difficult lives after the war, marginalized by their communities and condemned to make a living on the streets.

Especially alarming is the condition of Congolese women and victims of sexual violence, which has become a systematic weapon of war especially in the east of the country. Many women are held hostage and raped continuously until rebel forced leave the area of conflict. Others suffer violent acts in front of their husbands and children. Wives and daughters are forced to be raped or be murdered, acts which often leaves these female members of society highly traumatized and marginalized without further social or psychological assistance.

Objectives

The protest march of Congo-in-Europe is a movement that arises from below. It is a movement that involves young and old, Congolese and European associations, artists and intellectuals who have decided to walk together with John Mpaliza and bring their message of anger and peace. It is a journey of an entire people, a community which crosses seven countries to talk about the DRC to common people as well as a number of specific European and international institutions (see box for trajectory). The journey is made of many encounters and personal exchanges but above all of a joint hope: it is impossible to construct peace through institutions alone, for peace to take form it is necessary to walk together to give space to this forgotten massacre, to give justice to a people that deserves to be acknowledged in the world's collective memory, and which wants to participate in the reconstruction of its country through a series of concrete propositions.

Concretely, the protest march proposes the following:

- The realization of a road map for peace in Democratic Republic of Congo and in Africa's Great Lakes region. This road map must obtain two purposes:
 1. to face the situation within each involved country, in order to lead to governments' legitimacy and to democratic change in power;
 2. to plan a path of peace between the different states in this region, a path that has to favour a reconciliation among peoples living in this area.
- A global solution to the violent exploitation (both illegal and legal) of Congo's natural resources, such as coltan, copper and gold. On the one hand, this process should involve an increased transparency of commodity chains (through already existing initiatives like ITRI, GeSI, PACT) and, on the other hand, incentives for a durable and equitable economic use of these resources through integrated and sustained development. Besides mineral industries and governments these incentives have to improve in the first place the rights of Congolese workers through an autonomous institutional representation, which is nonexistent in the country so far;
- Growing attention for the problem of refugees and internally displaced people, through initiatives that aim to re-integrate people in the places where they choose to construct their lives and livelihoods, with the support of development organizations;
- A major fight against the impunity of armed groups in the region, including official armies, foreign and Congolese militias, which systematically obstruct human and civil rights. Such fight renders necessary an increased justice for the victims of the Congo wars. Secondly, it demands a redrawing of the rules of engagement of the current UN mission in the DRC, which frequently assists undisciplined army forces that have become the most important obstacle to peace in the region. The protection of civilians has to remain the prime objective of any humanitarian or peacekeeping intervention wanting to end conflict and bring durable peace.

Only through a sustained regional trajectory of democratization and authentic civic participation one can hope to solve the ongoing crisis in Africa's Great Lakes region. Legitimate government does not arise solely from elections and power sharing but through a shared reconciliation and popular justice. There is no future without forgiveness; there is no forgiveness without justice.

Committee for "March from DR Congo to Europe"

Itinerary

The protest march starts in Reggio Emilia (Italy) end July 2012 and crosses seven countries, for a total of 1.600 kilometres and passing through significant mile stones of contemporary and ancient European and Congolese memory: Milan, Turin, then following the Via Francigena towards Chambéry (France), Geneva (Switzerland, HQ of UNHCR), Freiburg (Germany), Strasbourg (France, seat of the European Parliament), Luxembourg, Maastricht (the Netherlands, homonym of the European Charter), Brussels (Belgium, seat of numerous European institutions and capital of Congo's former colony).

Institutions, organizations, artists and intellectuals who are currently sustaining the march:

Senate of the Italian Republic
Dynamique de la Diaspora Congolaise en Emilia-Romagna (DDCER)
Teatro dell'Argine-ITC Teatro (San Lazzaro, Italy)
European Alternatives
Transeuropa Festival
Human Rights Nights Film Festival
Political Geography Unit of the University of Zurich (Switzerland)
Faculty of Education of Bologna University (Italy)
Province of Rome (Italy)
Province of Reggio Emilia (Italy)
Province of Bologna (Italy)
Municipality of Reggio Emilia (Italy)
Municipality of Albinea (Italy)
Municipality of La Spezia (Italy)
Comitato Azione RD Congo (Italy)
National Archive of Diaries in Pieve Santo Stefano (Italy)
Centre Bruxellois d'Action Interculturelle (Belgium)
Strefa WolnoSłowa Foundation (Warsaw, Poland)
ARCI Bologna (Italy)
ARCI Milano (Italy)
Marco Baliani (director, author and actor)
Ascanio Celestini (author and actor)
Massimo Marino (journalist)
Marianella Sclavi (anthropologist)
Fanny & Alexander (artists)
Alessandra Belledi (director Teatro delle Briciole in Parma)
Letizia Quintavalla (director)
Ass. Olinda/Ex Ospedale Psichiatrico Paolo Pini in Milan (Italy)
Gerardo Guccini (lecturer, Bologna University)
Elisabetta Pozzi (actress)
Paolo Jedlowski (sociologist)
Ivo Quaranta (anthropologist)
Matéi Visniec (dramaturg)
Fabrice Melquiot (director Théâtre Am Stram Gram in Geneva)
Théâtre de Poche (Brussels, Belgium)

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