

Ep 30 - Unspeakable suffering, defiant hope

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Nearly 8 million Congolese displaced internally; 1 million refugees in neighbouring countries

<https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/unhcr-and-partners-urgently-seek-funding-congoles-e-refugee-numbers-soar>

News Coverage

- BBC Why is M23 fighting in DRC Short, good overview of the conflict <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/afobiqd-G9o>
- BBC Africa sounds of conflict short <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/MmUCRDx4GrI>
- BBC DRC history overview <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEOml5bc3HU>
- CBC current news on DRC conflict <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihQXIZYUcpU>

23.4 million Congolese suffer from food insecurity:

<https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-democratic-republic-congo>

VO: Hi my name is Ken Ogasawara and you're listening to Undercurrents, a podcast of Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario. Undercurrents is sponsored in part by our friends at Kindred Credit Union, a long-time and generous partner of MCC. *Kindred's purpose is cooperative banking that connects values and faith with finances, inspiring peaceful, just, and prosperous communities. Kindred supports welcoming communities for newcomers through products, service relationships, and partnerships.*

This episode is about unspeakable suffering ... and defiant hope.

The Democratic Republic of Congo, also referred to as simply Congo, is an enormous country in the middle of the African continent bordered by nine countries, including Rwanda and Uganda to the east, where much of the stories you'll hear today take place. We'll hear from Justin Zihindula and Esther Muziranenge, two Congolese from different families who were displaced and resettled in Canada in many years apart. The violence they were fleeing has been one of the most sustained and complex conflicts of the modern era, claiming the lives of an estimated 6

million Congolese people. Currently, a staggering 23.4 million Congolese suffer from food insecurity, making it the country most affected by food insecurity in the world.

So what has caused this immense suffering? In doing some very surface-level research for the root causes of this 30 + year conflict, I quickly realized that I had bitten off more than I could chew. Are there colonial influences still causing damage? Yes. Are there historic tensions between different ethnic groups? Yes. Is the world's appetite for the minerals in Congo fueling exploitation and violence? Also yes. Can I do justice to the nuances of all these complexities? No, and within this single short episode, I will not attempt to try. The point of this episode is to shine a light on the deep and largely ignored suffering of the Congolese people, the strength of spirit of those who have survived, and ultimately what can you, the listener, do about this. Some of the stories of violence you'll hear are disturbing, so please take care as you listen.

Justin: My name is Justin Zihindula. I'm from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Yeah. I grew up in the eastern part of the country. I started seeing things turning the wrong side, in the 1990s, like 1997, when they overturned the first government, like the government that I knew of, during the reign of President Mobutu in 1997, was already like in my, I believe I was in my 20s, 25th. 26ish and It's the time that things started getting bad very bad. The entire country was invaded by military forces from Rwanda and other neighboring country to overturn the government. And during that time, people were, a lot of people were killed.

Justin: And since that time, it had been over 30 years since that time. And life had been very difficult. Many people have to leave the country because of the same conflict.

[music]

VO: In the 1990s Justin was a father, husband, and nurse practitioner - he was well educated - a professional doing what he loved.

Justin: My life was not bad, but I was also forced because I saw that my security and my life was at risk. So I took off in 2009, I mean in 2003, and I also took the way to Uganda. lived there for six years prior to coming to Canada. But at that time I knew I saw a lot of refugees from the eastern part, many of them, the different refugee camps. And I still believe that many of them still there because they couldn't get the chance to, like me.

VO: Justin worked for the UN during his time as a refugee in Uganda, translating for his fellow Congolese neighbours, helping them register as a refugee with the UN, or letting them know about resettlement options.

Eventually, he and his family were selected to resettle in Canada as government-assisted refugees, but they had to leave extended family behind. After resettling in Canada, Justin, with support from his church, were able to sponsor more family members, including his brother, to come to Canada. But it was an excruciatingly long process.

Justin: They came here, but they stayed in Uganda for about nine years. Despite the sponsorship, it actually stretched because of some reasons, because of like the pandemic came in, the refugees from Syria came in and Ukraine. So the choice was to wait. So they waited for nine years, despite all what was already set up. But thank God that they came here.

VO: Justin noted that the crises in Syria and later Ukraine, delayed the arrival of his family members and this is unfortunately, not uncommon. The reality is that the number of refugees allowed into Canada, and where they come from, is often at the mercy of fickle political winds and media uptake. The decades-long grind of the crisis in the DR Congo had faded into the background, leaving already vulnerable and traumatized Congolese in limbo indefinitely, until recently a flare-up of the violence made news.

Current Crisis - January 2025 - M23 escalation

Justin: As I said, since 1997 up to now, eastern part have been really in hitting conflict. And it got exacerbated recently by the M23 when it took over the city of Goma and Bukavu.

CBC news clip : <https://youtu.be/ihQXIZYUcpU>

Justin: In January 26 to January 27, the city of Goma was invaded. Some of my family members were there. And they had just to run for their lives. They couldn't stand that. Even children are traumatized at a level that we can't even believe. Because they saw corpses lying down and being eaten by birds. It's unspeakable. Everything was just horrifying.

VO: Mennonite World Conference has convened an inter-Anabaptist task force to respond to this crisis after Mennonite churches in the region reached out to their global family pleading for support and prayers eanwhile, there are currently over 8 million Congolese displaced internally within Congo and thousands more flooding the refugee camps in neighbouring Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania.

VO: This has weighed heavily on Justin over the years, and especially since the latest surge of violence. In 2023, he went back to Uganda to visit with refugees and to assess the situation and see if there was some way he could help from afar.

Justin: I saw many refugees just suffering. Some of them are in the city because life in the refugee camps is unbelievable. Have no clean water, they have no food, they have nothing. And the government of Uganda, also the nations from Uganda, they feel like refugees are a burden for them. And they are trying to do as much as they can to just get rid of refugees. But they have no choice because they have nowhere to go. Cannot go back because there is no chance to live safely in the area because it's invaded and we don't know when solution like a place will be safe.

An Encounter: Girl Story

Justin: And the reason for me to be there was to start a small organization to take care of the community, of my own community where I was born, because the people were really in a situation where they can't produce food because of some reason of ongoing displacement.

VO: He was looking to establish some administrative supports for his small start-up organization, the Tumaini Letu Drc Project and hired a woman to help him with the work in the community. Some time after Justin returned home, this woman - a single mother of three young children and a trained nurse, was called in randomly for a job interview by someone she didn't know.

Justin: She was called and then they said, hey, we got your resume, come over for an interview. She was very excited to go.

VO: When she reached the office for the interview, things immediately took a strange turn.

Justin: So can you sign quick the papers before we can tell you about your role? She said, no, I need to know my role before I can sign and see if it aligns with my credentials and my skills and whatever. So your role will be to put people to sleep and we're going to, our organization harvest organs and then you're going to get paid when we harvest their organs, kidneys or whatever and we sell them and then you can get. And she said, not interested in that because my role is different is to protect the public. And they said, okay, if that's the cause then okay, that's for you, but you can hide, you can run, run, but you won't hide. We're going to get you anyways.

VO: This woman managed to leave the office, but a few weeks later, a woman in the same city with the same name was shot and killed. She knew she had to get out.

Justin: And then she had to run with her three children. And then when I got that information, I started to investigate about it and I found that the information was true.

VO: Justin's mission of supporting his people in the Congo, now became a mission to save this woman and her children by getting them OUT of the Congo. Thanks to generous donors who have put up the money to sponsor her for a year, and Justin's experience with sponsoring refugees, the process to resettle her to Canada is underway.

Given the urgent danger that this woman is in, her case has been fast-tracked and Justin is hopeful that she and her children will arrive later this year.

[music]

VO: Meanwhile I had the opportunity to speak to another Congolese person who had already resettled to Canada.

Ken: Let me see if I can say your name... Esther Muziranenge!

Esther: Yeah, you're right, that's perfect. Yeah, it is. Most people don't pronounce wrong. I should summarize it for you...

VO: She is twenty-three years old, the eldest of four children, and she resettled with her siblings and parents to Canada three years ago as government sponsored refugees. Esther was a young girl when her family had to flee the Congo and her memories of her early childhood in Congo are what you might expect a young girl to remember:

Esther: My memories growing up in Congo was like, okay, I was born whereby the neighborhood are mostly people you are related to. That's the people who really stay very close back home. And life in school, you have to walk a very far distance. Getting water you have to fetch somewhere else, not in the house like here, where we fetch firewoods, things like that. Like most of the work is done by hands. We don't have machines to use or work with.

VO: Her formative years were in Kenya where her mother worked as a seamstress and her father sold various goods to make ends meet and to pay the school fees for Esther and her three younger siblings. But as Justin has already said, going back to the Congo was not a safe option. And so resettling to yet another country was the only viable option, a process that started pretty much as soon as they were settled in Kenya, and took over ten years to complete. But when they finally were notified that they were being resettled to Canada, Esther had mixed feelings.

Esther: Because I know Kenya is not my origin home but for the time that I've been there I had made friends, I've met good people. Now the process of leaving the people you know and you're going somewhere where you don't know anybody. What you have in your mind is that life is more easier or better where you are going than where you are. But who are you going to meet there? I'm going to start over again to a new place. Everything will be new. So the feeling was like I'm happy because finally what I've been waiting for now I have it like I can say it's tomorrow I'm leaving but again the feeling of sadness was there because I was leaving my classmates I was leaving my friends.

VO: Esther and her family initially lived in London, Ontario. Esther upgraded her education to attain her Grade 12 equivalency, and her dad and younger brother had jobs. After a year, they moved to Stratford about an hour away.

Esther: When we moved, my dad had a job and my brother... And then my brother had to quit the job because he had to go start schooling in September. He's still in high school. And then after one month, my dad got terminated.

Ken Ogasawara: He got terminated from his job?

Esther: Yeah, from the job.

Ken Ogasawara: So then what?

Esther: Then he's home.

Ken Ogasawara: So who's working now to sustain the

Esther: That's me. It is what it is.

VO: Esther is now the sole income earner for her family of six.

Esther: I've worked in different places but right now I'm working at the hotel.

VO: Esther has dreams of studying to be a nursing assistant but can't move out to pursue that while being the only bread-winner in the family.

Esther: And if I have maybe, let's say, maybe if I would have somebody to provide for them, still I would need the money to pay my own rent where I'll be staying.

Ken Ogasawara: That's tough.

Esther: It is.

VO: Esther is very matter-of-fact about her situation. Meanwhile, her parents, even as they search for work in Stratford, have their hearts in Congo. I asked Esther if her parents ever talk about Congo.

Esther: Daily. Yeah.

Ken Ogasawara: What are they saying?

Esther: Because no matter where you go, they still have their relatives there. Like for me, I would say being the eldest kid, that means I'm with both my parents and I have my siblings with me. But for them, they are not with their parents. They don't have their siblings here. That means it's a place that they cannot think, they can't stop thinking about it. They can't just forget.

VO: I asked Esther if her relatives are safe.

Esther: They are not safe. They will sleep knowing like maybe at night somebody might attack us or not. I'd say it's something they're used to. Sometimes even I do think like how do they

manage sleeping knowing they might attack us or not? when you've got no option you get used to what you have.

Esther: If they get a chance to move out, I would say most of them will. But even moving, it's not that easy. Because they close borders, sometimes they miss the money. Moving costs a lot.

[music]

Esther: I can't visit my uncles. I can't visit my aunties. The borders are closed, and if they are not, the country is not safe, and I don't think I can risk my life that much.

We don't have a safe country, we are all over the world and we are even forgetting our cultures, our morals of which we don't have to. It doesn't matter if we have like a better life here, home means we'll still be home. I don't think

There's something I can celebrate better than living in Canada knowing that I can visit back home anytime. People who are there, they have a peaceful life, they have security and everything. The greatest hope I have is for Congo to be safe.

[music]

VO: What can we do here in Canada, when there is pain and suffering on the other side of the world? A friend of mine, who is an activist and not shy about protesting in the streets or calling her Member of Parliament, reflected recently that attending rallies or signing petitions are all well and good, but there is something that we can do that is far more powerful and life changing, and that is sponsoring a refugee. That is when stuff gets real, she said. Real relationships are made, real lives are saved, and really difficult challenges are met and overcome, together.

I said at the top of the show that the conflict in Congo is deeply complex. How to address the intergenerational trauma of historic and present colonial and economic exploitation? But when you choose to sponsor a refugee family from the Congo, you don't have to solve those problems. You focus on supporting one family or one individual to start a new life in a safe place - which is you and your community. Justin understands this, as he has been both a refugee and a sponsor. And he has one last thing to say about it:

Concluding message from Justin

Justin Actually the message is like first of all to thank the MCC for the tremendous work that they have invested in. Because I know that MCC have worked tirelessly to helping many of the refugees who are stuck and who has no voice to get like, get themselves in safe heaven. I would also say that the MCC continues to connect and create new sponsors who have the heart to helping those who are in need because there are many out there and they have no voice for who can, who are able to speak for them. And they have no people doing advocacy apart from the MCC and other few organizations. So we pray that MCC and the world today, it will try to talk

to many people who can sponsor as much refugees as they can, especially from the DRC and other refugees around the world. That's my word for today. Thank you.

[music]

VO: Please consider sponsoring a Congolese family through Canada's Blended Office Visa Referred program, or BVOR. The BVOR program is amazing because the federal government chips in for 6 months worth of living expenses for the family, and the individuals and families in the BVOR system are already vetted and travel-ready, which means you won't have to wait nine years for them to arrive, like Justin had to with his family. Email refugee@mcco.ca for more details. I will include a link in the show notes to a story with more details about MCC's recent relief efforts in DR Congo, as well as links to donate to ongoing efforts there.

I want to thank Justin and Esther for sharing their stories and we pray for their family members who are still in danger in Congo, or in refugee camps. Thanks to Christen Kong for the editing support, to Brian MacMillan for theme music, and Jesse Bergen for the Undercurrents artwork. Undercurrents is made possible by the generous support of Kindred Credit Union. And thank you for listening, please share with your friends. My name is Ken Ogasawara, have a great rest of your day.