

Backgrounder: Prayers for Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The United Church of Canada Mission and Service partner in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)—Église du Christ au Congo (ECC)—is appealing to the church and other ecumenical partners for prayers and solidarity.

A prolonged civil war, which began in 1996, has led to extreme violence and human rights abuses by various roaming militia groups. In particular, there has been widespread sexual violence against women and girls. Women and young girls are targets of violent rape, and children are taken and used as sexual slaves. The KAIROS Women of Courage Tour in July 2013 heard from many communities and survivors that rape is being used as a weapon of war. Millions of lives have been lost in the conflict, and millions destroyed.

The DRC is rich in minerals, in particular gold, titanium, tantalum, and tin. Tantalum, also known as coltan, is a necessary component in electronics (including the ubiquitous cell phone). High global demand for the DRC's resources is fuelling the conflict. Artisanally mined gold is smuggled out of the DRC to benefit leaders of armed groups.

“This cry of alarm invites us into national solidarity and compassion,” writes the Rev. Nzeba Kalombo Berthe, General Secretary of the ECC's Department for Women and Family. She then describes the need to “assist...innocent victims to recover their dignity as children [and] offer them hope as future professional women and honourable mothers.”

- **Search “Congo”** at www.united-church.ca for a bulletin insert, a prayer for the Democratic Republic of Congo, a YouTube playlist, links to partner initiatives, and further background on the issues.

Note: these resources address violence, including sexual violence. Discretion is advised.

- **Search “Open for Justice”** at www.kairoscanada.org to learn about how to call Canadian based mining companies to stronger accountability and regulation of their activities.

Survivor Testimonies

Communauté des Eglises de Pentecôte en Afrique Centrale (CEPAC), a member of Église du Christ au Congo, runs two hospitals in North Kivu, DRC. Kyeshero Hospital in Goma was created a few years ago in response to the epidemic of rape in the area.

In January 2014, Jeanne Banyere Nakatche (Mama Jeanne), District President of the Women and Families Department of Église du Christ au Congo (DFF/ECC) and Coordinator of the Centre for Survivors of Rape and War Orphans, collected disturbing testimonies from survivors at the hospital.

Note: these testimonies may not be appropriate for all ages. Discretion is advised.

- **Sifora**, 50 years old, is a married woman who was systematically raped during an entire year by different men in two different sites. The last time, it was men from M23 [a rebel group]. Her husband, declaring that he could not live with a raped woman, rejected her. He doesn't even want to have anything to do with his children. "I feel a lot of pain from sexually transmitted diseases," she says. "I pray God to give me strength. Without that, I cannot go on." It happened a year ago, and Sifora is still having problems. Her children are now dispersed, with the youngest ones—as young as six years old—staying alone at home now that Sifora is in the hospital.
- **Dusabe** had arrived at the centre of Mama Jeanne the evening before, having found her way there only one day after her rape. She was still in shock and had not yet spoken. Dusabe started sharing a few pieces of her ordeal: she had been in her field when seven men in uniform overpowered and raped her. Afterwards, she had become incontinent. The counsellor comforted Dusabe and then prayed for her. Dusabe was seven months pregnant at the time of her rape. Her husband had been killed by militia shortly before.

Accompaniment of Survivors of Rape and War Orphans in North Kivu

The DFF/ECC in North Kivu Province has ministered to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and orphans for over 20 years. The DFF/ECC rallies support from national and international partners to boost local initiatives, and advocates for political and economic measures to address the root causes of the ongoing conflict.

At the grassroots level, ECC women endeavour to meet huge needs with limited means. Local women volunteers and groups accompany survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and war orphans, regularly rally for donations, and provide hope. Foster families in the community take in war orphans; the costs for them to attend school are sponsored by the DFF/ECC with support through its international partnerships with The United Church of Canada and Global Ministries of the United Church of Christ/Disciples of Christ.

Local initiatives include pastoral care; economic, medical, and legal assistance; and training local congregations to respond to the needs of rape survivors. Many rape survivors are left feeling that life is worthless; their husbands may have abandoned them or been killed. They often need to find a new place to live, to be assisted with their children's school fees, and to learn new vocational skills. Survivors also have unique medical and legal needs, to prevent STDs and HIV/AIDS, retrieve evidence, and fight the general impunity of gender-based violence.

Both locally and globally, the churches show their solidarity through visits, prayers, and advocacy to end the violence. This solidarity sustains the hopes of survivors and communities. The church is present with the people and works for peace with justice, rooted in the strong faith that—despite enormous suffering—is prevalent in the DRC.

These initiatives are coordinated by the Provincial DFF/ECC Leadership in Goma, pictured on the following page:



Rev. Nzeba, National General Secretary of the DFF/ECC



Mama Gogo Kaviro, Director of the DFF/ECC in North Kivu



Mama Jeanne Banyere, President of the DFF/ECC Federation for Massisi District and Coordinator of the Center for Survivors of Rape and War Orphans



Mama Annie, coordinator of community-based care for war orphans and their schooling and of an adult literacy program for survivors of rape

Two of the ECC women leaders run projects for survivors of rape and war orphans. Mama Annie coordinates a community-based initiative ensuring subsidized schooling for school-aged children while they live with foster families. She also organizes adult literacy classes for survivors of rape. Mama Jeanne runs a centre for the accompaniment of survivors and care of war orphans.