Peace Bishop: Bishop Nicolas Djoma Lola -- Bishop of Tshumbé

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Fr. Nicolas Djomo Lola was appointed a bishop in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 1997 and immediately was thrust into a brutal war between Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire that lasted through 2003. That conflict exacerbated deadly ethnic conflicts in the eastern provinces of the Congo that continue to this day. Bishop Djomo, driven by his belief that Jesus Christ calls all people to build peace, and protect people from violence responded to this war and chaos in remarkable ways. He led a delegation of the Central Africa Bishops to advocate with the Presidents of Burundi, Rwanda and the DRC to end the inter-state wars. As President of the DRC Bishops’ Conference (CENCO) Bishop Djomo led a campaign to end the trafficking of conflict minerals that fueled the fighting in the East. He led a nationwide electoral education and monitoring program and then mounted an international advocacy campaign to ensure free and fair elections in 2011 and 2018.

Introduction

In 2006 the Congolese people were called to the election polls for the first time in 40 years of independence. This event was particularly striking in that it came after nine of the most turbulent years in their history. Those nine years saw one war led by Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda supporting a group of Zairian rebel groups that ended 32 years of corrupt autocratic rule by then President Mobutu Sese Seko in May 1997. When the new government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) fell out with his Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda backers, these countries invaded the DRC a second time in 1998, starting Africa’s ‘Second World War’. Four other regional countries (Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Chad) launched a counterattack to support the DRC government and to protect their political and economic interests in the DRC. These two regional alliances fought to a standoff that divided the DRC into two zones of control. The second war ended with a 2003 peace agreement.1

The inter-state war between seven countries and the DRC over resources and influence in the DRC then evolved into a smaller conflict in three eastern provinces bordering Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi. This violence erupted from longstanding competition between ethnic groups in the region over land and who was recognized as original to eastern Zaire and who was considered an immigrant/foreigner and not entitled to rights and land. Over twenty various militia groups formed out of this complex mix of competition and grievances. The presence of rich deposits of gold, tantalum, tin, tungsten, cobalt and lithium led these militia groups to vie for control over the deposits to be mined and the resources sold to finance the militias’ war efforts. These militias were also supported either by neighboring Rwanda, Uganda, or Burundi while others garnered support from DRC government and the Congolese army. The violence and its consequences continue to this day.

Despite the continuation of violence in the eastern provinces of the DRC, from 2003 the rest of the country started to stabilize under Laurent Kabila’s son Joseph Kabila who replaced his father after
security forces assassinated Laurent Kabila. One major effort towards re-establishing stability, democratic rule and sound governance was the plan to hold elections in 2006. Professor James Jay Carney recounts one poignant anecdote from this electoral process that involves Bishop Nicolas Djomo Lola, the central protagonist of this essay. Two elderly women went to the electoral polls in the town and diocese of Tshumbe led by Bishop Nicolas Djomo Lola in central DRC. Professor Carney recounts that when the women couldn’t find the name of the person they wanted to select as their parliamentary representative, they approached an election official asking, “Where is Djomo. We are here to vote for Mgr. Nicolas Djomo.” The official calmly told them that Mgr. Djomo is not a candidate. “The women threw up their hands and walked out. ‘If Djomo is not on the ballot, we do not vote.’” Professor Carney also interviewed an observer in Tshumbé who told him that, “the official state governor never comes here. The bishop (Djomo) is governor here.”

These anecdotes give you a sense of how important Bishop Djomo was to the people in his diocese. Although this occurred in a small, rural diocese in the heart of the rainforest of the DRC, Bishop Djomo did not limit his horizon to the borders of his diocese. Bishop Djomo rose to play a role on the larger stage of national, regional, and international politics. Bishop Djomo led Church efforts to end the wars and to build a new democracy through three Congolese elections in 2006, 2011 and in 2018.

This essay will recount how a newly consecrated bishop with a mild and unassuming, but firm demeanor in a small, out-of-the-way diocese was selected by his Church peers in the Congo and in the sub-region of the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi to lead the Church in the Congo and the region out of the worst crisis in their history and move his country towards the promise of a free and democratic nation. This story will cover five instances where Bishop Djomo stepped outside of his normal pastoral duties to address the chaos, violence and injustices that shook his country and those countries in that region. The first part will cover the first ‘World War’ of Africa from October 1996 through May 1997 and Bishop Djomo’s efforts to save the lives of eight children who managed to make it to Tshumbe fleeing the advance of AFDL rebels from Rwanda. The second part will address the Bishop Djomo’s efforts in 2002 to save lives by organizing humanitarian relief shipments up the Congo River all the way to Tshumbé. Part Three will recount how Bishop Djomo, newly elected the President of the Association of Catholic Bishops’ Conferences of Central Africa (ACEAC- DRC, Rwanda and Burundi) led the bishops of these three countries on a pilgrimage of peace to meet the Heads of State in each country. The fourth part recounts how Bishop Djomo placed the Church front and center in the worldwide effort to combat the phenomenon of conflict minerals. The fifth story will describe how the Church became the leading civil society actor in promoting free and fair elections in the DRC.

Part One: “For I Was A Stranger and You Welcomed Me” (Mat 25:35)
This story of Bishop Djomo and his work in the DRC must start with the shocking genocide that occurred in neighboring Rwanda from April through the beginning of July 1994. At this time, the world watched in increasing horror as information flooded out of Rwanda about horrific atrocities. Around 800,000 Tutsis and many Hutus working to stop the carnage lost their lives in three short months. It was the worst loss of human life since the Holocaust. As the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) forces pushed the Rwandan government forces out of power and ended the genocide, the world then witnessed a second massive catastrophe.
A wave of 2 million Rwandan refugees and tens of thousands of former Rwanda army and militia members, the Interahamwe (many of whom perpetrated the genocide) flooded into Eastern Zaire in a manner of days to escape the RPF armed forces. For the next two years the former Rwandan army and militias, transformed into the FDLR-Democratic Front for the Liberation of Rwanda and with support from the Zairian government of President Mobutu Sese Seko, launched attacks back into Rwanda against the new and struggling Rwandan Government controlled by Vice President Paul Kagame and the Rwandan Patriotic Front party government. By 1996 the Kagame government, fearing that the FDLR and a million refugees just across the border could grow into an existential threat, formed an alliance with regional countries Angola, Burundi and Uganda to arm and unite various Zairian rebel groups to clear out the FDLR and the refugee camps and overthrow the Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko.

In October 1996 this newly formed Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL) crossed the border into Zaire attacked the FDLR forces and the Zairian army and pushed them back from the border. This started what became to be known as the First World War of Africa.

In March 1997 the AFDL marched into the Province of Kasais Oriental and the town of Lodja. If they had stopped to notice, they would have found the Major Inter-diocesan Seminary Jean-Paul II of Lodja founded and directed by Fr. Nicolas Djomo Lola. Fr. Djomo had opened the major seminary in 1982 and was its Rector when the AFDL marched into town.

Bishop Djomo recounted that the most striking and painful experience he witnessed was the flood of Rwandan Hutu refugees that had walked hundreds of miles to Lodja from Goma ahead of the AFDL troops. These people were sure that if they had been caught by the AFDL, or the Rwandan troops, they would have been killed. They were emaciated, hungry and weak, but didn’t dare stop so we could at least feed them. Some of the most desperate abandoned their children whom they could no longer carry, or who could not survive further displacement. The seminary welcomed eight children left along the way. “We cared for all their needs and gave them schooling. The seminary took the extraordinary measure to change their names to local Zairian names so the Rwandan forces could not recognize them as Rwandan and threaten them. Most of these young people finished high school and university studies and are now working productively.” Bishop Djomo reported that these children, now all adults, are perfectly integrated in the local life in the diocese. In 1997, very early on in what would be a nine-year long war in Zaire-DR Congo, Fr. and then Bishop Djomo was struck and moved to act in the face of unimaginable suffering. Mothers and fathers chose to walk away from their own children trusting that they would be better off under Fr. Djomo’s care. This is a testament to the humanity of Fr. Djomo in response to the inhumanity imposed by a cruel war.

Part Two: For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food (Matthew 25:35) – Peace Barges
The AFDL and Rwandan troops captured the capital of Zaire in May of 1997 and installed Laurent Kabila as the new President of a new country the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The people in Kinshasa were at first happy to see the end of the Mobutu regime. At Kabila’s swearing in ceremony in the national stadium the crowd cheered and shouted down some who called for the perennial opposition party leader Etienne Tchisekedi to be named the rightful President. This turned out to be a honeymoon that was short lived.
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Bishop of Tshumbé

President Laurent Kabila faced many huge challenges. He worked to set up his first government to replace the shambles left behind by the corrupt, repressive, yet fragile façade of a government led by Mobutu Sese Seko. He had to rebuild an economy and government finances that were destroyed by decades of bad governance and war.

Over time, the Congolese, especially those in the capital Kinshasa, became increasingly dissatisfied with the presence and the heavy-handed repression of the Rwandan army and allied forces who had put President Kabila into power. The Rwandan forces took over much of the responsibilities of law and order. The Rwandan forces also met with resistance because of their Rwandan ethnic origins and the fact that they were effectively wielding power that the local ethnic groups thought was rightly theirs to wield. In short, the Rwandans lost their aura of liberators and became an unwelcome occupying force.

In addition, even before Laurent Kabila was sworn in as President, he immediately gave himself the right to rule by decree until a new Parliament could approve a new constitution. He issued orders that suspended all political party activities, and appointed new judges, administrative and military officials. Although Kabila’s actions resembled those of former President Mobutu, he promised to hold democratic elections in two years.

He broke those promises. As politicians, the press, and civil society groups started to criticize his government, Kabila immediately lashed out by arresting scores of people, at least twelve human rights advocates, NGO representatives and opposition politicians. The most prominent of them was the elder and respected opposition politician Etienne Tshisekedi. Kabila had him exiled to his home village in the Kasais. In the end, President Kabila squandered any vestige of good will that he had earned for ending Mobutu’s reign.

Under these conditions it was inevitable that tensions would rise and destabilize an already fragile situation. Clashes between the Rwandans and the local population broke out. President Kabila began overt efforts to distance himself from his Rwandan backers. In July 1998 Kabila sacked the Rwandan officer who was the commander of the Congolese army and asked the Rwandan army troops to leave the country. He started to reinstate and promote generals and officers from the former Zairian army and place them in the eastern provinces.

Nine months later in August 1998 Rwanda sent a military force by air to an airport near to Kinshasa and it marched on Kinshasa to topple President Kabila. Rwanda recruited, built, and supported a new rebel group the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) and for the second time in two years invaded the Congo to topple the very leader they had put in place only two years earlier. Shortly after, Uganda also invaded the Congo to stop attacks by an anti-Uganda rebel group the Allied Democratic Forces. Laurent Kabila called on Angola, Zimbabwe, Chad and Namibia to intervene to stop the Rwandan forces. Within a short time, Angola, Zimbabwe, Chad and Namibia joined forces to prop up President Kabila opposing Rwanda and its allies Burundi and Uganda. Thus began Africa’s Second World War and it raged until 2003.

Back in Lodja Fr. Nicolas Djomo was elevated to be the bishop of Tshumbé in November 1997, a mere six months after Laurent Kabila was made President. When the second war broke out in
mid-1998, the forces of Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda had gained control over the eastern half of the country. The frontline between the two rival forces laid in West Kasai meaning that Bishop Djomo’s diocese of Tshumbé found itself under the control of the Rwandan-backed RCD. Fortunately, the diocese experienced no major fighting and was spared massive destruction and loss of life, but Bishop Djomo recounts that, “The people suffered enormously from constant pillaging of villagers’ goods, crops and animals by the Rwandan and RCD forces. They confiscated every car in town except mine. They emptied shops and merchants’ stores and shipped goods and furniture back to Rwanda. They emptied the only bank in Lodja of all its currency and destroyed it.”

Bishop Djomo told the story of when he was stopped by an RCD child soldier carrying a gun and clearly under the influence of some drug. The child ordered him out of the car and began to scream at him madly. At that point, “I feared for my very life.” said Bishop Djomo. Fortunately, an adult soldier who was watching the scene jumped on the child and immobilized him. “This older soldier told me to continue on my way.” Such is life where the rule of law and daily social norms have broken down completely. You find your life in the hands of a child with a gun under the influence and no way of knowing what to do. By the grace of God go I.

The partition of the country meant that Tshumbé was cut off from all economic and social exchanges and trade with the capital Kinshasa and from normal trade routes with the eastern provinces. In 2002 after four years of isolation from the capital and pillaging by RCD forces, the people in the diocese of Tshumbé were straining under the weight of hunger and deprivation.

Bishop Djomo teamed up with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to purchase hundreds of tons of relief supplies to ship up the Congo and Sankuru rivers to the Tshumbé diocese. After months of planning and arduous negotiations with both the Congolese Government and the RCD-Rwandan officials the ‘Peace’ barges steamed up the river across the lines of battle and arrived in March 2002. The barge, containing 760 mt of humanitarian supplies, consisted of iodized salt, clothing, fuel, soap, school supplies, medicine, and other goods, took 19 days, having covered 1,300 km (812 miles) under United Nations escort, to reach its destination from the capital, Kinshasa. "What we are really aiming to do with this project is to open up the river to normal traffic," Cassie Knight, a CRS programme officer said. "This is something that all of the belligerent parties have agreed to, and we're hoping river traffic can restart," he added.

Bishop Djomo organized a second barge convoy with the help of CRS and the World Food Program. It carried more relief supplies like food and water and medical supplies and 1,000 people who had fled the Kasai province during the fighting to take refuge in Kinshasa. The team equipped the barges with 3 doctors and nurses. The trip took three weeks during which the medical team conducted nine surgeries and delivered three babies. Bishop Djomo arranged overland transport to Lodja where people reintegrated back into their families and communities.

I was working with CRS at this time stationed in Cameroon. I remember reading and hearing about the ‘Peace’ barges. It is a story of the power of courage and determination under the worst conditions of uncertain war and extreme poverty. No one would have criticized Bishop Djomo if after only a few years as bishop of Tshumbé and having escaped a threat to his life at gunpoint, he had stayed safe in his diocesan residence and Church. Instead, he led an international relief effort
and recruited the help from Catholic Relief Services, the World Food Program, the UN peacekeeping forces and negotiated with the belligerent parties to the war to bring relief to his people and bring back others to their rightful homes. These are initiatives that are well outside of a bishop’s expertise, skill set and job. Bishop Djomo showed his people that he was their shepherd who goes out of his way to care for his flock.

Part Three: Blessed Are the Peacemakers (Matthew 5:9)
In 2002, the same year that Bishop Djomo was organizing the Peace Barges, he was elected President of ACEAC, the Regional Association of Episcopal Conferences of Central Africa (Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo). Most decisions in the Church are taken at the level of the parish, the diocese and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Regional conferences like ACEAC have no real authority over the national conferences, but they do help in coordinating among the national conferences, especially when there are problems between those countries in the region. This was certainly the case in ACEAC in 2002. Burundi had witnessed a coup d’état in 1993 which started a brutal civil war, the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, the invasion of Zaire by Rwandan troops and AFDL in 1996-97, the second Africa world war from 1998 – 2003 pitting Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda against the DRC backed by Angola, Zimbabwe, Chad, and Namibia.

The second war in the DRC involving seven neighboring countries was unprecedented, highly destabilizing and shocked all of Africa. In 1999 the Organization of African Unity began to organize peace talks which led to the Lusaka Accord in July 1999. The agreement mandated an Inter-Congolese Dialogue (ICD) process led by a neutral mediator. The process would convene the armed Congolese factions that included the Rwanda-supported RCD and another faction that operated in northern DRC with Ugandan support, the Congolese Liberation Movement (MLC) led by Jean Pierre Mbemba. Also, Congolese representatives of unarmed civil society were invited. The goal of the ICD was to negotiate an end to the war, the withdraw of all foreign armed forces from the DRC and establish a new political order to lead to elections and a new legitimate government.\textsuperscript{v}

Implementation of the Lusaka agreement, however, did not start for real until July 2001 two years after the agreement was signed. Initially, the Kabila government frustrated the efforts by the mediator Sir Ketumile Masire. This was because Laurent Kabila tried very hard to avoid a dialogue that he considered too threatening to his power.\textsuperscript{vi} In January 2001 Laurent Kabila was assassinated by one his security guards and his son Joseph Kabila was appointed to succeed him. Joseph Kabila quickly agreed to support Masire’s work to show the international community that he was committed to ending the war.\textsuperscript{vii}

The ICD preparations and negotiations were long and complicated.\textsuperscript{viii} Different phases were held in Gaborone, then Botswana, Abuja, Nigeria, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and finally started in earnest in Sun City, South Africa from February-April 2002. Negotiators had to call a second phase in Sun City II when a final agreement was finally signed in April 2003. The agreement reached in Sun City also created a dynamic that led to the signature of the Pretoria accord between the governments of the DRC and neighboring Rwanda, which in turn opened the way to an all-inclusive accord and the formation of the Transitional Government.
At this time, as President of ACEAC Bishop Djomo mobilized the ACEAC Permanent Committee to engage in the peace process. The Permanent Committee organized meetings with the two heads of State, President Pierre Buyoya of Burundi and Vice-President Paul Kagame of Rwanda. Bishop Djomo said that the bishops urged the two Presidents to join in serious negotiations to end the war. “We told them that it is only through negotiations that they could avoid further war and the atrocities inflicted on their populations who are suffering the most. Our message was generally well received.” For the DRC, Bishop Djomo mobilized the entire body of bishops from Burundi, Rwanda and the DRC to meet with President Joseph Kabila in Kinshasa. Their message was the same as the one delivered in Kigali and Bujumbura. Bishop Djomo recounted that, “President Kabila asked us how when the three countries were locked in war, we, all the bishops from the three countries, were in perfect agreement. Our response consisted of reminding him of the desire of our Lord to unite the human race as one family thanks to our resurrection in Christ. Our unity is founded in our faith in Christ, the Prince of Peace who came and gave up his life for eternal peace for all of us.” Our response and our presence clearly had an impact on him. It is difficult though to know if that meeting played a role in his commitment to end the war.”

In 2004 one observer Kasaija Phillip Apuuli noted that, “Since the signing of the Sun City II agreement, rebel factions that had been left out of the peace process have arrived in Kinshasa ready to join the transition government. Even when disagreements have emerged during the construction of the government, parties have not gone back to war, but rather they have agreed to settle their differences at the negotiating table. No group wants to be associated with having been the one that scuttled the process.”

Returning to Bishop Djomo’s point about not knowing whether the bishops’ intervention in the three countries had any impact, one could say that at the least, the bishops from Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC modeled international unity and collaboration. This seems to have had the most impact on President Joseph Kabila, admittedly the most important actor at that time. A year later, the African countries who had invaded, or intervened in the DRC had withdrawn their forces. All the major Congolese factions ended their battle to take control by force of arms and instead joined in a political, electoral competition to allow the people to decide who would govern them for the first time in 40 years. The Transitional Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo took power in July 2003.

CENCO recognized the significance of the 2006 elections in its statement issued on July 10, 2008, saying, “The installation of new institutions coming out of our democratic elections... constitutes for sure a major accomplishment for our young democracy. At the same time, it inaugurates a new era of responsible management of our country.”

Part Four: “Minerals of Misfortune”
These enormous victories may have ended the inter-state wars and installed a democratically elected national government, but the gains remained fragile. Two of the Congolese factions the RCD and the MLC continued fighting, but in a restricted area of eastern Congo in the Province of Ituri. The conflict was driven by rivalries between the Lindu and Hemah peoples in the eastern part of the country and they both fought the Tutsi who had settled in the region in colonial times and others who entered the region to escape persecution in Rwanda.
In the Province of North Kivu rebel General Laurent Nkunda and his mostly Tutsi troops began to clash with Congolese soldiers driven by long standing animosity between Hutus and Tutsis and other ethnic groups. Séverine Autserre, an expert on the Congo adds that “…there are centuries-old antagonisms among native Congolese communities, such as the Hundes, the Nandes, and the Nyangas. But the fiercest disputes oppose them to Congolese of Rwandan descent. In the early part of the twentieth century, Belgian colonial administrators relocated over 85,000 people, both Hutu and Tutsi, from overpopulated Rwanda to the sparse Kivu provinces in Congo, and in the 1960s and 1970s various waves of Tutsis fled there to escape pogroms in Rwanda. Today, Congolese of Rwandan descent, especially the Tutsis among them, own most of the land, but the Hundes and the Nyangas continue to claim it as their own on the grounds that it was never rightfully sold or given away.”

The arrival of refugees from the genocide and war in Rwanda in 1994 and the disruption and displacement of the two wars added enormously to the chaos and conflict in the eastern provinces. Rwanda and Uganda were complicit in supporting these conflicts for political purposes and to gain control over the region’s rich and diverse natural resource base.

The Church remained vigilant as it watched this new more localized, but yet still dangerous conflict. The Church and other local and international actors noted a new driver to the conflict. Eastern Congo had some of the world’s richest deposits of gold, tantalum, tin, and tungsten in the world. These minerals were crucial inputs to the production of cell phones, computers and all the electronic devices that drive the modern technological world. More recently, cobalt and lithium have become essential elements to produce batteries that power these devices and the production of clean energy technologies that are crucial to addressing climate change.

The armed militias would attack the villages in the vicinity of mines, displace the population and force them to mine the resources. The armed groups used the income earned from the illicit mining and sale of minerals to fund the purchase of weapons, the recruitment and maintenance of militia fighters and expand their control over new mining sites. The militia often sold and exported their minerals through the neighboring countries of Rwanda and Uganda who sold them to the international markets.

The Church knew that resolving the ethnic rivalries over land and citizenship required long term solutions. The bishops looked for more immediate solutions to stop the violence. They turned their attention to a new strategy which was to address this new phenomenon of ‘conflict minerals’ to cut off the primary source of funding to these armed groups. In 2008 the bishops of the DRC elected Bishop Djomo to be President of CENCO and asked him to lead them into the middle of the fray.

The Church jumped in with both feet. CENCO issued three statements in 2008, one in July, then October and the third in November 2008. All three statements decried the ongoing horrific conflict in the East. The October statement titled “Yet More Innocent Blood in the RD Congo”. CENCO condemned the return of conflict in the East, the use of people as human shields, the recruitment of child soldiers, the pillaging of the country’s natural resources, and the ‘Balkanization” of the country into “dwarf states” created by neighboring countries to ensure their control over the natural resources. The Church urgently called on the Government to bring an end to the fighting and bloodshed and to protect the territorial integrity of the DRC. The November statement raised more clearly the central role of natural resources, “It is clear that certain powers
covet the natural resources of the RD Congo and these resources are not foreign to the violence that is imposed on our population. How else to understand why the different agreements have been violated without effective pressure to get the signatories to respect them?xvi

That same year the Church sent three delegations to the United States to raise these same concerns to lawmakers and Administration officials. Archbishop François-Xavier Maroy from Bukavu and Dr. Denis Mukwege from the Bukavu Panzi Gynecological Hospital visited in April 2008; Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo and Bishop Nicolas Djomo in May; and in December Archbishop Fridolin Ambongo, Bishop Fulgence Mutaba and Sr. Marie-Bernard Alima. The three-member delegation in December also addressed a semi-annual meeting of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Of these visits and the many meetings they held, perhaps the most consequential in terms of stirring positive movement was a meeting that Archbishop Maroy and Dr. Mukwege had with Senator Sam Brownback in April 2008. Catholic Relief Services and International NGO staff and I accompanied Archbishop Maroy and Dr. Mukwege. Senator Brownback was a conservative Senator from Kansas generally hesitant to support additional business regulations. He was open minded to ways to halt the sale of conflict minerals in the DR Congo. Senator Brownback, a practicing Catholic, was taken by the Church in the Congo’s call to end the illicit trade. The Church and many international NGOs pointed to the Kimberley process initiated to end the phenomenon of blood diamonds in Sierra Leone as a successful example.

Both Archbishop Maroy and Dr. Mukwege described the horror of violence and rape in the Congo used as a ‘weapon of war’ to terrorize people from their villages. Dr. Mukwege, a gynecologist in the Panzi hospital in Bukavu described the horrible injuries inflicted on women. He then took one hand and said, “If this hand is the map of all the mineral mines in our area and (raising the other hand) this is the map of the places where women have been raped in our region, (putting his hands together) this is how they overlap perfectly. Senator Brownback visibly moved by the presentation of the violence against women, turned to his staff and gave them instructions to work with the NGOs, the Church and their Democratic colleagues Senators Russ Feingold and Dick Durbin to draft a bill that would accomplish this goal.xvii That provided the bipartisan support needed to get the bill passed. The bill was introduced and passed in the House later and became the Congo Conflict Minerals bill of 2009. The bill required companies who buy tantalum, tin, and tungsten to produce their electronic devices to study their supply chain to ensure that the minerals did not come from illicit mines in the DR Congo. That bill was attached to the Dodd-Frank Financial Reform act of 2010 as Section 1502 and passed into law. This was a major win for the Church and the many international NGOs who worked on the technical and advocacy aspects of the bill. Europe soon passed a similar regulatory law that further strengthened the effort to end conflict minerals. International NGOs started to monitor companies’ compliance with the regulations and studied their reports to the Securities and Exchange Commission. These regulations are still in effect today, but not without further efforts to protect them.

The mid-term elections in 2010 gave the Republican party control over the House of Representatives and its various Committees and launched efforts to overturn Section 1502. On May 12, 2012 the House Subcommittee on International Monetary Policy and Trade called a hearing entitled “Costs and Consequences of Section 1502: Impacts on America and the Congo”.

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Those opposing the bill argued that 1502 was passed with little debate, was attached to the Dodd-Frank bill that had nothing to do with conflict minerals in the DRC and although conflict in the DRC is serious and minerals are playing a role in sustaining the fighting, the bill may be well intentioned, but it cannot succeed. In fact, at the time of the hearing, the Securities and Exchange Commission had not yet published its rules for the bill because the issues were complex and the SEC wanted to allow for maximum time for all parties to submit their positions and recommendations. Those who supported the bill countered that the bill had been debated.

in committees before being attached to the Dodd-Frank bill at the last minute. They countered that even before the SEC had written its rules, companies had started to study ways to comply with the bill in compliance with OECD guidelines and a code of conduct. State Department and USAID had started a private-public program between NGOs and corporations to design new conflict-free supply chain procedures. The Subcommittee called on seven volunteer witnesses to testify in writing and in person. Three witnesses came from associations of private for-profit sectors, one from a company called Claigan Environmentals that advises companies on supply chain regulations, one from a University, another from the Hoover Institute, and Bishop Djomo, the only witness who was Congolese living and working in the DRC.

The debate centered around whether 1502 should be repealed altogether, amended to improve its efficacy, or allowed to stand as is. The evidence presented pitted the costs and consequences to companies along the entire supply chain, against the chances that such regulations would have a positive impact, or any impact at all. A third consideration was the moral imperative that US companies, the US Government and the American people have to make sure that they do everything possible and feasible to avoid contributing to the misery caused by the violence in the Congo. Bishop Djomo defended a strong enforcement of 1502 despite some consequences. If some conflict mines close, some people might lose work, but that work is exploitative at best and borders on slave labor at worst. It’s also dangerous work because these mines are artisanal, unprofessional and unregulated. People die regularly by mine collapses and flooding. If they lose work in the mine, they were farmers before the mine and they’ll go back to farming, especially if they get help from NGOs and donors. If you force the mines to close, that cuts off funding, the armed groups leave, and people can eventually get back to their former lives. The other option is if you legalize the mines, work becomes safer, miners and local people can benefit from legitimate work and income, tax revenue would increase. Violence would decrease and the rest of the population can return to their homes and farms and resume their lives. In the same way, if international corporations ensure that their supply chains are not tainted by conflict minerals, the United States and the American people will know that they have done their part to reduce conflict and show the world that they truly believe in their principles of democracy, the rule of law and dignity. In his written testimony, he spoke to the business corporations saying that he was confident they would join him in saving lives by ensuring that they are not playing a part in funding violence. To the idea of revising, or watering down 1502 he said, “We have full confidence in good will of the US Government, the SEC and the business sector to realize that this is not the time to water down SEC regulations to half measures that may save money at the cost of lives.”

I found and contacted one witness, Mr. Bruce Calder from Claigan Environmentals in Canada who testified on the same panel as Bishop Djomo. Mr. Calder told me that he remembered Bishop Djomo well. He said that Djomo’s calm, matter of fact and methodical manner gave him a gravitas
that was indisputable. Everyone on the witness panel and among the Representatives questioning the witnesses treated him with great respect. There was a sense that one would be a fool to argue with him.

I asked Bruce about the about the impacts that 1502 had in the industries that use these minerals. He said immediately that the impact has been far reaching beyond initial expectations. Major worldwide corporations like Apple and Google and many others have created the Responsible Miming Initiative that is a network capable of doing deep dives into supply chains and overturning ‘rocks’ to find conflict or illicit minerals and reporting on their findings and actions. He said this work has doubled its coverage of supply chains in the last five years and has added new minerals like cobalt and mica. This work has also revealed some unexpected and astounding findings. Not long ago this work uncovered how North Korea was creating and moving its gold, reported on it and the network was shut down. The most astounding finding occurred in mid-March 2022 when this compliance network discovered a Russian source of gold trafficking that was probably financing its war effort in Ukraine and shut it down. Closer to the DRC, the supply chain network discovered a secret gold smelter processing Congolese gold operating in Uganda by a well-known minerals trader named Alan Gertler. He has now been sanctioned. We would never had found this without the passage of the Congo Conflict Minerals act and the worldwide supply chain monitoring network built by the corporations themselves.

One nagging fact continues to darken this picture. In ten years, Section 1502 has changed the way the world makes and employs minerals which is heartening. The fact still remains though the conflict and suffering in Eastern Congo continues. Have we taken the minerals out of ‘conflict minerals’, but left the conflict? Or are there still many conflict mines that evade detection and continue to fuel the fighting? Can the world now claim that we play no part in the violence, check that box and wash our hands of what remains? The international community and the Congolese still have much work to do to end the fighting.

Part Five: “The Courage of Truth”
CENCO, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Congo, is perhaps the most engaged and effective conference on the continent of Africa, especially when one studies their work on national elections. Their involvement in politics started many years before the election in 2006 when the Church led a transition process to democracy in the early 1990s. Although the process failed because then President Mobutu refused to run the risk of losing power in a free and fair election, the process was surpassed by the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and the subsequent war. The Sun City Accord stipulated that elections for a legitimate government would be held in 2005. This was pushed back to December 2006. The Church along with most other Congolese concluded that this would be the people’s first chance to select their own government and establish a democracy for the first time in their 40 history. In preparation for the 2006 election the Church organized a 20,000-member election monitoring team, the largest domestic team in the country. The Church also set up an election education program. By all accounts the 2006 elections marked a true turning point in the country’s history. The Church called it the beginning of the country’s third republic.

The elections in 2011, however, were seen by all Congolese and the international community as the true test of whether the Congo could consolidate a durable democracy, or whether it would backslide into constitutional autocracy. The Church said the challenge for the Government,
“Concerns notably the effective functioning of institutions that derive from democratic elections and from the recognition that the people are primary sovereigns and holders of power.”

The Church again organized another round of election education programs. The Church also deployed 30,000 electoral monitors covering a good part of the country and 23.9% of all polling stations. When the polls closed and the results came out, it was clear that massive fraud had occurred. The Carter Center concluded that, “Preliminary findings concluded that the Independent Electoral Commission's administration of the election was fraught with logistical and budgetary challenges. On multiple important election preparations, commission operations deviated from the electoral calendar. The Carter Center found the provisional presidential election results announced by the election commission lacked credibility.” The European Union declared, “The Union’s electoral observation mission deplores the lack of transparency and irregularities in the collection, compilation and publication of the results.” In particular, the EU said that of the 4,875 polling stations not included in the final published results, 2,020 were from Kinshasa, the opposition party’s stronghold.

Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo speaking on behalf of the Church declared that, “…there is really good reason to conclude that the results announced do not conform to the truth nor to justice.”

On January 11, 2012 at the end their Extraordinary General Assembly, CENCO announced that, “We believe that the electoral process was tainted by serious irregularities that call into question the credibility of the published results. We call on the organizers to have the courage and honesty to draw the necessary conclusions… But if you take the risk to continue to govern by defiance, domestic tensions, more or less controllable in the short term will culminate sooner or later in a serious crisis difficult to undo.” It is sad to say that President Kabila opted to rule in defiance of the people’s will. The United States recognized the flaws in the elections, but in the end recognized President Kabila’s election.

Despite this result, the Church persisted in its determination to plant the flag of democracy in the DRC for the 2016 elections. Their persistence was tested to the limit as President Kabila launched a marathon serious of machinations to stay in power. He knew that the DRC was surrounded by countries (Uganda, Rwanda, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon) whose Presidents had changed their national constitutions to permit an unlimited number of mandates. The Church and public opinion were openly against this effort and it failed. Bishop Djomo said that in one meeting with Kabila, “We the bishops insisted that he had to reduce the tensions in the country and go on national TV and announce he would not run and that instead another party leader would lead the ticket. In frustration, President Kabila retorted, “Why are you trying to embarrass me?”

Despite this, Kabila delayed the elections until December 2018 and did not confirm that he wouldn’t run until August 2018 when he informed the country that Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary would be his party’s candidate. Kabila delayed elections by insisting that the elections couldn’t be held without redoing a national census which would have pushed the elections well beyond the constitutional mandate. He also delayed the transfer of funding to the national electoral commission CENI saying that there were no funds. Kabila then announced a call for a national dialogue with all the political parties to develop a new national consensus. He tried to enlist the United Nations to sponsor the dialogue, but the UN rejected the proposal. Kabila convinced the
Africa Union to sponsor the dialogue process and appointed a Togolese politician Edem Kodjo to conduct it. These delays and a ban on peaceful demonstrations caused unrest in the country that led to 17 deaths.

Bishop Djomo in his last year as President of CENCO traveled to the United States in August 2016 with an urgent plea to convince the U.S. to pressure President Kabila to hold elections and not push the country into another round of chaos. The Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace Bishop Oscar Cantu traveled to the DRC in 2016 and again in 2017 to encourage the Church in its efforts. He met with Congolese officials and top leadership in the electoral commission to support the Church calls for free and fair elections and an open political space for all parties to express their views and programs.

In 2017, the Church took the bold move to call for a national dialogue, separate from the AU sponsored talks to be held under the Church’s auspices with the goal of ending all uncertainty about the electoral timetable which had already gone well past the Constitutional stipulation. The talks between all the political parties and the government established a final agreement on December 31, 2017 called the St. Sylvester Accord. Although Bishop Djomo had reached the end of his mandate as CENCO President and his replacement had been duly placed in office, Djomo continued as an active and key participant in the mediation effort and all efforts after that. The agreement set out the full electoral calendar of preparations and events culminating in elections in December 2018. The international community and the Congolese people supported the agreement. The Church Lay Coordination Committee held two peaceful marches in support of the agreement, but police forces fired on the demonstrations provoking condemnation from abroad and inside the DRC. The Bishops’ Conference held another extraordinary assembly to condemn the violence and call on all parties, the people, the government, and the international community to reduce tensions, allow for an open and peaceful campaign to be held in strict conformity with the St. Sylvester Accord.

Elections were finally held on December 30, one week after the date set in the St. Sylvester Accord. Once again, the elections were shrouded in intrigue and corruption. The actual day went off remarkably well. The Church fielded 40,000 monitors across the country, centralized their results and developed its final analysis and report. The CENI also processed their results and on January 10 announced that Felix Tchisekedi had won with 7 million votes to Martin Fayulu’s 6.6 million and Shadary getting 4.4 million. The Catholic Church immediately announced that those results did not match the results they had compiled from their observers. The Church held a private meeting with the diplomatic corps where it presented its results unofficially with the implicit request to the diplomats to ensure that the true voice of the people was respected.

On January 11 the UN Security Council held a meeting where France, the UK, Belgium, and Germany supported the Catholic Church’s call to CENI to release the official individual polling results to verify the official overall account. The United States did not join in this statement. On January 17, 2019 the Africa Union heads of stated called on the DRC Constitutional Court to delay its official ruling on the elections until the AU could send a delegation to resolve the growing crisis. Instead, the court issued its ruling on January 19 and the AU mission was canceled.
Stephen Weissman, a DRC expert captured the events of this period in a Foreign Policy article entitled “Why Did Washington Allow a Stolen Election to Stand?” He and international news services reported that CENI had leaked the true results of the election and upon analysis these results were a very close match to the CENCO results. Fayulu had won by a large margin. Both Tchisekedi and Shadary had only won about a third of the votes garnered by Fayulu. Weissman also reports on a key meeting between the CENI President Corneil Nnanga and the US Embassy when Nnanga informed the Embassy that Fayulu had won, but Nnanga could not release these results for fear of his life. Despite all of this, the United States, unlike the other European nations, did not challenge the Constitutional Court’s final ruling that Tchisekedi had won and Tchisekedi was sworn in as President. Mo Ibrahim, founder of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation which promotes good governance in Africa and Alan Doss, President of the Koffi Anan Foundation called the elections, “…a defeat for democracy.” They argued that those in the international community that supported the election results failed the people of the Congo. “The results compiled by the independent national election commission (CENI), leaked to the press, confirm those of the Catholic Church, which fielded 40,000 observers across the country. They show that Martin Fayulu, the opposition coalition candidate, won the presidential election, not by a whisker, but by a landslide”.

The final outcome was truly a mixed victory. The election was clearly defrauded by a last-minute deal between outgoing President Kabila and the candidate Felix Tchisekedi. The other side of the coin was that this was the first transfer of power between parties in the country’s history. When the country blew past the December 2016 constitutional deadline for elections, most Congolese and observers held serious doubts that elections would ever be held. If held, everyone expected them to be defrauded to confer victory on President Kabila. In the end, elections were held; Kabila did not run and his hand-picked successor did not win; and a transfer of power occurred. All of these victories were due to the extraordinary and courageous efforts of the Catholic Church. At every step in the process from 2016 through January 2019, when things looked precarious, Congolese and the international community looked to the Church for answers. The Church did not disappoint; it was the undisputed champion of truth, democracy and a stalwart defender of the common good. Bishop Djomo was the chief architect of that victory. It was a fitting and climactic final act in Bishop Djomo’s four year mandate in ACEAC and his eight year tenure as President of CENCO.

Conclusion
In light of Bishop Djomo’s long trajectory of humanitarian and peacebuilding work, how do we understand and come to terms with his work. Jay Carney describes Djomo as a true bishop of Vatican II who defends the dignity of the human person and a Pope Francis bishop, one who smells like his sheep. He not only feels for them, but he is out in the fields and villages with them making sure they can fulfill their human dignity. Carney says that Bishop Djomo embodied the “theopolitical imagination that prioritizes ‘agape’, the selfless love of neighbor that lies at the heart of the Christian vision of community.”

What was rare about him was that he was able to project that love, that agape not only where his people lived their lives, but in a myriad of other places and contexts that were far from his job, his diocese, and his expertise as a pastor. He willingly accepted the burden of working with development and humanitarian workers to care for his people’s immediate needs. He took on the
enormous risk of engaging with three African Presidents like Moses to Pharaoh to plead for peace in the Great Lakes countries. He traveled to Europe and the United States to speak to Ministers, Congressmen, Senators, Ambassadors, State Department, National Security Council and Securities and Exchange Commissioners to plead the case on the conflict minerals act and for free and fair elections. He went from being a bishop in a small, out of the way diocese to a national and international actor. His assets were the credibility of the Church in the DRC, the moral imperative of his message and the language of Catholic Social Teaching to apply those morals to the war, the suffering, and the aspirations of a people who longed for freedom and democracy.

In this way he was able to employ the vertical reach that the Church has from the village-parish level of society to the middle level, state and diocesan level all the way to top of the national government and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference CENCO. He was effective at all those levels and thus able to affect change. He also extended that internationally in a way that mirrors the international reach of the Holy See.

Bishop Djomo and his Church were able to complement the institution’s moral credibility by building an impressive technical and human resource capacity to advise the bishops on issues of politics, civic education, natural resource management, election observations and a team of people able to translate the Church’s moral and social teachings into concrete and actionable analysis and recommendations announced in their numerous CENCO statements. The National Peace and Justice Commission, the Catholic, and Jesuit universities became the bishops’ think tanks and they created other think tanks like the Center on Natural Resources and the Cardinal Martino Institute on Catholic Social Teaching. This is proof of enormous creativity and out of the box thinking from an institution that has the reputation of being a legacy establishment 2,000-year-old institution. It must be said though, that the Church is endowed with enormous wealth relative to other Congolese institutions that dates to the many gifts and favors bestowed on the Church by the Belgian colonial leaders and past Congolese elites. To the Church’s credit, it has not hoarded all that wealth to itself, but has invested it in institutions like those mentioned above.

Allied with the institutional capacity and its ability to adapt and evolve over time is the durability and sustainability that the Church shows. The Church has been a voice and presence in the political life of the country before independence, during the Mobutu regime and reached a peak in the early 1990’s when the country attempted to transition from Mobutu’s autocratic rule to a democracy. The Church peaked again as a key force for peace during the two wars and has monitored every election since 2006 and has offered electoral and civic education as well.

J.J. Carney raises the dilemma of the Church having to step in and provide services like education, health care, roads and bridges in the absence of a state that neglects these needs. He raises the very pronounced political role that the Church has played in the Congo’s history. In many countries across the world the Church has a tradition of providing education and health care. It is part of the Church’s identity and charism. In addition, the Church in many countries has voiced its opposition to political policies and government actions that violate Catholic Social teaching, democratic or human rights. What is remarkable in the Congo is that the Church has been an actual actor on the political stage. In the attempted transition to democracy in the early 1990’s Archbishop Monsengwo was called on to lead a transitional parliament providing his credibility to be an unbiased, and uninterested bridge to a new democratic dispensation. In 2017 the Church
Peace Bishop: Bishop Nicolas Djoma Lola
Bishop of Tshumbé

intervened to mediate a negotiations process to build another bridge from political crisis to a new consensus on elections. These efforts have succeeded to some extent.

What has been harder to address successfully is to establish durable good governance and a society that does not operate through corruption, patronage, shadow political rules and parallel economies as the coin of the realm. Free and fair elections could lead to a legitimate government, but if the political and economic dynamics and incentives of the past are not replaced with new systems of constitutional and judicial rule of law, and just, well-regulated economies, democratic elections will not lead to democratic rule. The elite who control the underground political and economic game will continue to reap the benefits while the people pay the cost. It could happen that a free and fair election could bring to the fore a remarkable new leader who could rewrite the informal rules and incentives of the game and slowly build a democratic and just country. Jason Stearns in his new book The War that Does Not Say its Name ponders this challenge. He wonders if you brought in Ghandi, or Martin Luther King whether either of them could succeed in building a new more just society, much less resist the temptation of the huge incentives of the informal and illicit systems in the Congo. In our case, if we brought back St. Francis, or St. Paul, would they be able to turn the tide.

The basic problem here is with translating credibility, institutions, creativity, sustainability... into sufficient influence to make, or catalyze positive change. The task is not like building and staffing a school, or hospital in the place of the government. In this case, the Church cannot become the government. It can only use its moral suasion and credibility to influence that government to put the right people in the right structures with the right systems and incentives to build a just government and a prosperous and equitable economy for all, one that serves the common good.

Another point bears mentioning which is that this at times attempts to influence, if not counter a government come at a price. Church leaders were at times attacked physically and in the press. Church demonstrations were broken up by force. Political leaders on all sides begged for Church approval and when it was denied, they turned on the Church, in particular the government. The other church denominations were long lined up against the Catholic Church and reportedly were cultivated by government and other political leaders for support in opposition to the Catholic Church. It was not until 2021 when the Church of Christ of the Congo, a federation of mainline Christian denominations allied itself with the Catholic Church in preparation for the 2023 national elections. CENCO and the ECC now make joint statements on political issues of the day. At every step along the way, the Church was willing to pay that price and forge on.

Bishop Nicolas Djomo has been a lead actor in the Church’s efforts to save lives, halt the wars and bring peace, and institute a new society that is democratic, peaceful, well governed and prosperous. He has reached retirement age and sent in his letter of resignation to the Holy Father. It is no surprise to this author that the Holy Father sees yet more potential and mission for this shepherd of peace. It is my hope that he lives many more years as a force for good in a country that continues to cry out for peace. But when he does retire, he will do so knowing that he has been a good and faithful servant.
Stephen Hilbert has lived and worked in Africa for 22 years including 3 years as a Peace Corps Volunteer Middle School English Teacher and then 19 years with Catholic Relief Services (CRS). In CRS he served Mauritania, Rwanda, Morocco, The Gambia, and Cameroon. He has worked 15 years as the Africa Policy Advisor in the Office on International Justice and Peace in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. As Africa Policy Advisor Steve supported and collaborated with the Catholic Church in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Nigeria, and the Central African Republic.

Endnotes

i This era of Zaire now the Democratic Republic of Congo’s history was captured in a book with the ominous title Dancing in the Glory of Monsters by Jason Stearns (Public Affairs, 2011).

ii “The Bishop is Governor Here”: Bishop Nicolas Djomo Lola and Catholic Leadership in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. J.J. Carney, October 14, 2014

iii Email message from Bishop Nicolas Djomo of March 21, 2022.

iv The New Humanitarian report, 8 March 2002


vi Ibid. For a detailed discussion on what Laurent Kabila did to frustrate Masire’s efforts, see International Crisis Group 2000.


ix Email message from Bishop Nicolas Djomo of March 21, 2022.

x Ibid.

xi Ibid


xiii Interview with Nicolas Djomo in January 2013, Tshumbé, DRC. Quoted from Chapter 5: “The Bishop is Governor Here”, Bishop Djomo and the Catholic Leadership in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, John Jay Carney 2014
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xiv Auteserre, Séverine, The Trouble with the Congo – How Local Disputes Fuel Regional Conflict, Foreign Affairs; May-June 2008. Pg 2


xvi LA RD CONGO PLEURE SES ENFANTS, ELLE EST INCONSOLABLE (cf. Mt2, 18) :Déclaration du Comité permanent des évêques sur la guerre dans l’Est et dans le Nord-Est de la RD Congo, 13 November 2008

xvii Meeting with Senator Brown and staff on April 1, 2008.

xviii Telephone conversation with Mr. Bruce Calder, Vice President of Consulting Services, Claigan Environmental – March 29, 2022


xxi Agence France Press “EU slams ‘deplorable' DRC election results”, EMMANUEL PEUCHOT KINSHASA, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO - Dec 14, 2011 06:53

xii Declaration by Cardinal L. Monsengwo Pasinya on the Presidential Elections in the DRC, 12 December 2011

xxiii Le courage de la vérité (cf. 2Cor7, 14), Message de l’Assemblée plénière extraordinaire de la CENCO aux fidèles catholiques et à l’ensemble du peuple congolais, January 11, 2012


xxv Ibid.

xxvi Congo’s election: a defeat for democracy, a disaster for the people, The Guardian

xxvii Op cit. J.J. Carney, “The Bishop is Governor Here”

xxviii Ibid. pg. 113