

The tragic plights of the democratic republic of congo

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Introduction Nearly 5. 4 million Congolese citizens have been killed since 1998 due to the war over the country's basic resources, rich minerals and government. This is one of the deadliest strifes since World War II. And yet, the media does not focus on all the commotion happening in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Why? Wars, diseases like ebola, complicated relationships with the DRC and other breaking news happen so suddenly, they capture the media's attention, while the Congolese conflict has been happening for so long that it's no longer " recent" news.

Unfortunately, the problem is not going away quickly. Due to the DRC's corrupt government and its struggle for control against rebel forces, there is still a shocking amount of human suffering from ongoing civil war, and wild animals are being captured for illegal trade on the black market. The Democratic Republic of Congo pleads for global attention in order to help bring peace, aid, true democracy, and environmental conservation to the region. An Overview of the DRC's Problem The Congo's conflict is complicated; even its name has a brief past. The area now known as the DRC used to be called Zaire.

Since the 1800s, it has been a region terrorized by wars fueled by corporations inside and outside of Africa, starting with the Belgians who initially colonized the Congolese. King Leopold II of Belgium named the area of Zaire the " Congo Free State," which is ironic because no people have completely been free in that area since before colonization. Leopold ruled for 75 years non-stop and caused brutal and violent murders. Despite all the efforts of the Congolese people, during King Leopold's reign over Zaire, the people were judged based on their race, religion, family, and skin color. The <https://assignbuster.com/the-tragic-plights-of-the-democratic-republic-of-congo/>

Belgians treated the Congolese like inferior children, patronizing them and making them feel as though they needed to teach them the best way to live. In the eyes of the Belgians, the native people weren't intelligent enough to handle leadership positions. Belgians destroyed the Congo with slavery and endless toil, then left abruptly both in 1875 and again in the 1960s with no economy or politics in place. After the Belgians left, other Europeans resettled the Congolese tribes until the 1950s. The Europeans eliminated tribal identity, enforcing strict rules and a fearsome police force, giving curfews at night so that the native people would wake up at early hours to work brutally long periods of time for the benefit of the imperial countries. In the 1950s and 60s, intolerant, militant nationalist groups rose to power and competed over the DRC. These rebel groups made corrupt deals with outside countries and terrorized their own people by holding hostages, fighting civil wars, marrying girls as young as 8, and forcing boys into military groups at very young ages.

Shockingly, over 15 percent of the newly recruited combatants are under the age of 18. Patrice Lumumba, a Congolese man, was the very first head of state who wanted to keep all resources for the Congolese people and for national development. Unfortunately, Lumumba was overthrown with US and European support for an ally for the Cold War. Lumumba replaced by Mobutu Sese Soko, who would trade cheaply with the powers that threw Lumumba from power and act like their puppet on the international stage. Soko was a dictator whose troops were supposedly armed and trained by the US, which helped him keep the people quiet and to keep under control while they forced them into slave labor for rubber, ivory and timber. When Soko was

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overthrown by a rebel force called Laurent Kabila in 1997, US president Clinton supposedly offered military support once again (Hartung and Moix).

The DRC's Corrupt Government The DRC's corrupt government struggles over resources and battles for power. Author Eliot Schrefer of the novel *Endangered* explains that since colonization, the DRC has "suffered a succession of dictators and widespread violence, while other neighboring countries, such as Congo-Brazzaville or Central African Republic, have had a somewhat easier time" (257). The DRC's main issue is its exploitation of resources. Schrefer calls the richness of the land the DRC's "curse". "Elsewhere," explains Schrefer, "politicians need a tax base to get money.

In Congo, all a politician needs is to pull minerals out of the earth and sell them." In other words, people and endangered animals are less important than efficient mining. "It's an irony about Africa that it's most resource-rich countries are often it's most unstable"(257-258). Meaning that people of the DRC focus too much on mining, instead of focusing on foundational problems like basic resources or education for the people, which soon become unstable. Some examples of resources in high demand within the DRC include: Cassiterite, Tin, Copper, Timber, Water, Diamonds, and Coltan.

Coltan in particular is used widely in technology such as mobile phones made by Nokia and Ericsson, computer chips from Intel, and other electronics such as Sony stereos and VCRs. Tantalum, which is refined coltan, sells for \$100 a pound. This "magic dust" is becoming increasingly vital to modern life. According to a 2001 United Nations Security Council report: RPA [a Rwandan rebel group] must have made at least \$250 million over a period of

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18 months. This is substantial enough to finance the war [for power over resources in the DRC].

Here lies the vicious circle of the war. Coltan has permitted the Rwandan army to sustain its presence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The army has provided protection and security to the individuals and companies extracting the mineral. These have made money which is shared with the army, which in turn continues to provide the enabling environment to continue the exploitation. It's incredibly unfortunate that Rwanda takes advantage of the DRC's resources, using the diversion of the corrupt government as an alibi. And they are not alone.

According to a report in The Industry Standard, Ugandan and Burundian rebels have also been involved in the looting and smuggling of coltan, using illegal monopolies, forced labor, prisoners and even murder. According to Amnesty International, many other effects and tactics have arisen from the ongoing conflict. Amazingly, after the Belgians left, only 17 college-educated Congolese in the whole country remained, meaning that untrained men were put in very important government positions. These unqualified government officials made unfavorable alliances and treaties within the DRC, which led to further exploitation of resources by other countries such as Rwanda.

Furthermore, violent military operations were conducted on citizens of the DRC to gain control over the minerals in the area. The rich minerals caused the forced labor of the Congolese people.

Other corruption included heavy and unfair "taxation" where the taxes were used for sole advantage of the on the unethical government, whose public

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services such as hospitals were always on the brink of collapse, leaving citizens of the DRC in a ruinous position. Since gaining their “freedom” from colonization, the main fighting in the DRC has occurred along the eastern border. This area is mostly under foreign control, and over three quarters of the estimated number of killings have taken place there, with approximately 90 percent of the DRC’s internally displaced population having fled violence from that region. The DRC police usually cannot be trusted, so outside of the US embassy, which has United Nations’ support, there is no way to fix any problems. In our daily lives within the United States, we put a great deal of faith into the way our country works, and we live our lives without stressing about diplomatic issues.

The DRC is now in need of a strong legal system like our own to hold everyone accountable for their actions with laws and consequences, so that people develop faith in authority again. They are also in need of a strong economy to employ more people in the right ways. The civil war in the DRC is fueling the region’s human suffering. King Leopold II of Belgium began what’s been more than 200 years of civil torment and anguish. King Leopold II abused the power and value of the Congolese citizens, forcing them into slave labor to work on his rubber plantations and other resources, brutally lacerating the limbs of runaways or delinquents.

Eliot Schrefer says that “There was an attitude among the colonists that empowerment of native Congolese would subvert the country” (257). A report from 2001 showed some alarming facts about the people living in the DRC. For example, 50% of Congolese who have lost their homes are on the

eastern side of the DRC and more than one million of the displaced have received absolutely no outside aid. Wages for the people of the DRC are as small as 18 US cents. Also, it is estimated that up to 2.5 million people in the DRC have died since the outbreak of the civil war from preventable diseases.

In addition, the health infrastructure has been destroyed in the city of Masisi, leading to contaminated drinking water. Furthermore, in some parts of the DRC, only 3% of the population has drinking water. Tragically, a lack of basic resources continued to lead to a majority of deaths caused by diseases like malaria, diarrhea, pneumonia, malnutrition, and cholera. At least 37 percent of the population, approximately 18.5 million people back in 2001, had no access to any kind of medical attention. Appallingly, there are around 3,000 doctors for a population of 50 million.

1,000 of these are in Kinshasa, lowering the overall health across the whole DRC. Eliot Schrefer explains at the end of his novel, *Endangered*: When there is such a humanitarian crisis going on [...] Is it moral to concern ourselves with non human suffering? [..

.] The two issues can't be separated. How we treat the environment is inextricably linked to how we treat one another. The same systems of social power - in Congo's case, a corrupt government and rapacious corporate forces- treat unprivileged humans and animals in much the same way. Schrefer means that how we treat the environment resembles the way humankind is treating itself, and in the Congo, the corrupt government abuses its power to treat humans and animals cruelly in the same manner.

Effects On The Environment And Wildlife One of the most disastrous effects

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of the DRC's instability has been the poaching of wild animals for illegal black market trade.

The coltan precious mineral trade as mentioned earlier has had a deep impact on the DRC's natural world. Many of the national parks already inside the DRC that protect endangered species and precious minerals are often taken over by rebel groups. In addition, starvation in the region due to war has caused more Congolese who aren't necessarily poachers to do what they need to do to survive, which often means exploiting the area's minerals and wildlife. According to the World Wildlife Federation, the UN Security Council is targeting individuals and groups who illegally support armed rebels who bring harm to wildlife and who illegally trade the DRC's natural resources. These armed rebels are most likely being funded on the proceeds made by wildlife poaching and trafficking. Wendy Elliott, species program manager at WWF, states that " This is a huge step forward for reducing human suffering, improving peace and security and strengthening wildlife conservation.

" The UN is doing the best they can to stop poaching and trafficking, although not much ground has been covered. Over 20, 000 elephants and many more rhinos are killed each month for their priceless ivory tusks and horns. Bonobos are also endangered. The DRC, south of the Congo River, is the only place where bonobos live, and the corrupt government makes life harder for them. As explained by the author of Endangered, how poaching works is like this: hunters enter the forest and wait until night when the bonobos call to each other.

The hunters hide and in the early morning they shoot or machete as many as they can that are sleeping in their tree nests. The adult bonobos are eaten or sold as bushmeat where they can make \$50 US dollars on the black market, or \$1500 if smuggled and sold internationally. The infant bonobos are caged and transported to larger cities and most don't survive the trip. Because a person living in the DRC makes an income of only about \$12 a month, the sale of a bonobo gives a trafficker plenty of money and motivation to kill again. It's interesting to observe the similarities in behavior between humans and primates in this area of the world, knowing that we share 98% similar DNA.

Bonobos tend to be more calm and loving to one another while chimpanzees can be aggressive, greedy and violent with each other. The difference in their behavior may be from where each group lives. The Congo River splits territory between chimpanzees and bonobos, with chimpanzees living north of the river in a smaller section of land, and bonobos living down south of the river where land and food are plenty. Because bonobos have more resources than chimps, there is much more violence among chimps than between bonobos. Like the chimpanzees, the people of the DRC are treating each other and their environment unkindly because of a lack of resources.

Yet, humans like all primates are capable of kindness, generosity and living peacefully. Every person involved in the DRC conflict could learn a lot from the loving way that bonobos treat each other, who prove that it is possible for everyone to coexist in peace. Eliot Schrefer, the author of *Endangered*, believes that: The difference between widespread conflict and widespread harmony lies in access to resources. The Congolese in the east have scant

support from the government – little education, roads, hospitals, police – and so are vulnerable to militia groups who rove, raping women and recruiting boys. But would the militias persist if there wasn't such a struggle for resources? When there's enough to eat, you don't have to use violence to get your dinner.

Just ask the bonobos. They're right there in Congo's backyard. Conclusion What can we, who sit in comparative luxury, do to help? Hopefully we can begin to make the Congo a better place, once we understand the conflicts in the region and how we can help bring change, even if in a small way. As Eliot Schrefer says, " Conservation takes money" to " maintain environmental integrity." For example, we can support wildlife sanctuaries such as Yo La Bonobo.

Also, Kiva. org is a website that offers a way for people to lend money to families and individuals, which can help change a person's life. We can also donate to new businesses who are trying to get financial support through kiva. org. The following links are among the best groups working in conservation today with projects that directly impact wildlife: African Wildlife Foundation, World Wildlife Fund , Conservation International , and ARCUS Foundation. Nowadays, Internet and technology have simplified the ways of communication across the globe, but they also seem to have distanced the relationship between those who check their email four times a day and those who have never seen computer, but still mine the coltan to make electronics.

Furthermore, we as developed nations can reduce this inequality by using our technology to our advantage. For example, we can provide mechanical

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mining equipment and other digging technology in order to help businesses work fairly and efficiently in the Congo. We can also help establish basic infrastructure like cell phone towers and bandwidth across the DRC to support cell phone and Internet use. Another way we can use technology to show the world that the plight of the DRC demands global attention is by encouraging citizen journalism. Citizen journalism is a form of news gathering by regular citizens who use the cameras on their phones and other forms of technology to report news happening where “ the action” is, especially in places that are hard for the regular media to reach, or in places where “ the action” isn’t deemed “ worthy” for normal news coverage. Citizen journalists can upload their articles and videos on websites such as Youtube, spreading news and awareness around the globe in the blink of an eye, and catching the attention of the professional media. Eliot Schrefer said it best when he urged his readers to act like a conservationist and “ Look. Notice” (261). In other words, be an observer in life. Eventually you’ll see how others who aren’t like you live.

You’ll realize that if you want to preserve the way wild animals live then you have to also consider how to preserve the way human beings live too. Works Cited Schrefer, Eliot. *Endangered*. New York: Scholastic, 2012. Print.

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