Cultural Quick Guide: Democratic Republic of the Congo

This guide is intended to help Boise State University (BSU) students and community volunteers prepare for their service experience with refugee resettlement agencies. Learning about a refugee’s nation of origin, languages, and cultures is fundamental to understanding who they are and thus more effectively helping them integrate into American culture. Additionally, tips for teaching English and interacting socially will improve communication and the chances of a successful experience for both the volunteer and the refugee. It takes many human-service professionals as well as volunteers from the community to participate in refugee resettlement program. Thank you for helping to welcome refugees to our community.

Where is the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), formerly known as Zaire, is situated in central Africa. It has a small area of coastline on the South Atlantic where the coastal city of Banana is located.

The Congo River system covers an area of 400,000 square miles [1]. The Congo has many rivers, the largest being the Congo River, (see Figure 1) which begins as a tributary named Lulonga in the south and then flows north to become the Congo. The Congo River creates a section of the country’s eastern border before it crosses through the country to serve as a border to Angola. The Congo River and its tributaries create the second largest rainforest on earth. Many refugees flee into the rainforest for shelter when violence spills into the camps.

Climate

Because the equator runs through the Congo, it experiences a mild tropical climate year round. Refugees who come to Boise from the Congo will have never seen snow or had to worry about heavy winter clothing.

Figure 1 Map of the Congo and surrounding region www.un.org
What is the Conflict?

The conflict in the Congo has been going on for much of the last 30 years. The country was previously called Zaire before the change of power. There are two main reasons for the conflict: the natural resources and the Tutsi and Hutu ethnic tensions.

The tensions from the Rwandan genocide spilled over the borders into the Congo in 1996. The Rwandan Hutu armies fled Rwanda and allied with the Zairian forces to continue the ethnic cleansing of the Tutsi tribes in eastern Zaire, now the DRC [1].

The Second Congo War began in 1998. The self-proclaimed president, Kabila, named the country The Democratic Republic of Congo. He was attacked by the “Mouvement pour la liberation du Congo” (the movement for the liberation of Congo), whose troops were backed by Rwanda and Uganda. Then troops from Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia joined in the battle. Kabila was assassinated in 2001; he was succeeded by his son [2].

The conflict in the DRC has been going on for so long, that when a refugee was asked “what was it like before the conflict?” he responded that “there is no before”. For many refugees, violence and terror is all that they have known. The fighting began in 1960 and has not ceased since.

The country is so plentiful in natural resources that everyone wants to control it. The Congo has the means to be a very rich country; but most of the money that is made off of the resources is spent on war.

During the 1990’s, multiple oppositions sprung up around the country. At some points, war was being fought on all four sides of the country:

- On the North, the MLC led by Jeanne Peirre Bemba.
- On the Eastern front were the Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi armies led by Dia Wambe.
- On the Northeast near Sudan was the UPC with leader Thoma Lubanga.

With so many fronts attacking at once, the Congo army was stretched thin. In June of 2003, almost all armies had withdrawn except Rwanda; but the fighting never subsided.

A constitution was voted on and the country held its second multi-party election on July 30th, 2006. The results upset many people by showing Kabila was still the rightful president. His opposition was Bemba, the leader of the Mouvement. Bemba was upset and demanded another vote that was held on October 29, 2006. The results of the second vote were the same and Kabila was sworn in as president.
The country has never become one unified nation. There have long been multiple parties, each fighting for control of the nation. Because of this ongoing conflict, severe human rights violations have occurred against the two main tribes: the Tutsis and Hutus. In Rwanda, the Hutus have been trying to destroy the Tutsis similar to the ethnic cleansing of the Jews in the World War II.

The continuous fighting of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda constantly threatens the border. Rwanda’s support of the RCD (Rebels fighting against the Capital of Kinshasa) assisted in the rebel offensive in October of 2008; causing the refugee crisis. This war is the deadliest since WWII and has killed an estimated 5 million people.

**War Conflict Facts**
- Approximately 40-45,000 people are dying each month in the Congo (2009);
- 3.9 million have been reported and an estimated 3.6 million people have been forced to leave their home;
- Nearly half of the people who are killed or die are children under the age of five;
- The main cause of death is disease and famine in the refugee camps.

**What was their journey?**

Most of the refugees of the DRC have fled from the eastern part of the country to the camps that are just across the border in Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania. One of the paths to leave was to travel from Kinshasa to the Congo (the smaller Congo country to the east of the DRC), and then to Cameroon. In the southern part of the country, the refugees leave through Zambia and live in the Mahebe refugee camp. In the south, the refugees go to a camp called Mahebe in the Zambian city of de Solulez (see Figure 3).

The United Nations and other agencies have been trying hard to give aid to the Congolese people and to assist them in safely crossing the borders into the refugee camps. Because the fighting has been going on for so long, many of the refugees have been living in the camps for their entire lives, or for the majority of them.

*Life in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*
Most Congolese live in the rural areas of the country. Only about 30 percent live in urban areas. The urban areas are the most influenced by western culture. In the cities, people enjoy dancing and socializing. The Congolese have created their own type of music that blends Jazz and Jamaican Rumba. Soccer (or football, as it is called in the Congo) is the most common sport in the Congo.

Soccer is to Congolese what football is to the United States [3].

Many of the small villages are still operating in the same way as they had many years ago. People live in small hut type houses with dirt as their floors.

Clothing in the Congo is somewhat conservative in relation to American clothing. Men traditionally wear shirts and pants. Women wear wrap around skirts that go to their ankles; they do not wear revealing clothing such as short skirts (see figure 5).

At meals, urban families use silver ware, but in the villages they usually eat with their right hands [3]. In some families the men and women eat separately. Traditionally, the oldest male will serve the meat to the other members of the family. The meals usually include fufu, a mixture of water and flour [3]. Congolese people eat a lot of peanuts, tomatoes, and fresh fruits and vegetables (see Figure 4). They also enjoy eating fish, rice and beans.

The women of the Congo bow when they greet their husband. If they are walking from one point to another and a man is between the points, the woman will walk a long way around the man to her destination. When greeting others, the Congolese do not look directly at the person to whom they are speaking. It is considered polite to look away.

There are many different ethnicities and languages in the DRC. Approximately 700 local languages and dialects are spoken and as many as 250 ethnic groups have been identified. Tribal affiliation is often more important for Congolese refugees than national affiliation, and tribal names are a significant marker of religious identity and social status. There are four national languages and each is spoken in a general area of the country. Kikongo is spoken primarily in the West, Lingala is used in the North and in the capital city of Kishana, Tshiluba is found in the central part of the country, and Swahili is used in the East and South. The official language of the country is French, which is used for education, trade, and government purposes and eases communication between the different ethnic groups. A person’s social status and level of education is often judge by their fluency in French.
With so many different ethnicities there are a lot of religions practiced in the DRC (see Figure 5 below) [1-2]. Approximately 50% are Roman Catholic; 20% Protestant; 10% Islam; 10% traditional beliefs; and 10% a branch of Christianity, called Kimbanguism.

**Life in Refugee Camps**

Life in the refugee camps surrounding Congo is hostile and uncomfortable. The lack of food creates stampedes when the aid trucks arrive. The most horrific thing about the refugee camps is that they are being attacked just as brutally as the cities from which the people flee. Since the war began in 1998, millions have been displaced from their homes and have died, either from famine, disease, or violence. The refugee camps are being “forcibly emptied and looted before being burned”, according to the BBC news [1]. The refugees must leave the camps to survive and some end up living in the surrounding forests because they feel they are safer there than in the camps. If the refugees are found by the military in other countries, the troops will take the refugee back into the Congo. Most of the Congolese have lived the majority of their lives in the camps; the average time spent there is between 10-15 years.

There is limited education in the camps. However, there is something similar to what we would call a trade school. The residents who do not have an education are taught a trade, but not academics. The number of Congolese who attain higher levels of education remain low, with 41.7% of the population never having attended school. As of 2003, the DRC was one of the top five countries in the world with the largest number of children out of school. The majority of absentees are girls. Many children are recruited as soldiers and schools destroyed in conflicts. Congolese refugee children who attend school in a Ugandan camp often have greater exposure to English from the Ugandan educational system.

Many of the poor families stay in the camps, farming and working as their trade. Youth can apply and receive scholarships from the UN or other agencies to go to a school in the country of the camp. Those who already have an education are usually hired and begin to work in a position in their chosen field. They usually move out of the camps and become part of the country’s society where they live.

In one Boise case, the refugee was a teacher in the Congo. He had a very well respected career much like a doctor in the US. He had a nice home in Kinasha with electricity and all of the amenities. The fighting began and he fled to Cameroon. He slept on the ground in a small hut. Eventually, he was able to get a job as a teacher in Cameroon. He was fortunate to have only spent three years in a refugee camp. He submitted an application to leave the country as a refugee and was accepted to move to the United States. Since moving to the US, he has been a guest speaker for French classes at Boise State University.

**Life in Boise**
Currently there are approximately 150 Congolese refugees living in the Boise area. They enjoy attending churches of their faith.

What Activities Might I do with Refugees?

Below are some suggestions for activities that refugees might enjoy doing with you; and then possibly on their own when they are familiar with the area.

**Soccer.**
Even though Boise doesn’t have a professional team there are league games that they could watch, or even play in. With the amount of parks that Boise has, a family game while on a picnic would be a great way for them to enjoy the weather in the spring and summer.

**Idaho History Museum**
Many of the refugees have no knowledge of Idaho history. This could be a fun way for them to learn about their new home.

**Saturday Farmers Market**
The market opens in mid-April and closes at the end of September or beginning of October and is held downtown on 8th Street between Idaho and Main Streets and extends to the Boise Center on the Grove.

**Thai Market on Overland**
The Thai Market on Overland St. has the type of flour that the Congolese use to make their Fufu. They would be able to make a meal that is familiar.

**Is it Something I Said?**
Table 1 below shows the translations of some phrases from French to English. The last column gives the basic pronunciation of the phrases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Helpful French Phrases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>English</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good morning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My name is...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you speak English?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Where Can I Learn More?

The sites and information below can help you expand your knowledge of the DRC.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/1072684.stm
This is a timeline of the DRC from the 1200’s to the present.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/guides/456900/456977/html/default.stm
This website has a tabbed navigation for the History, Geography, People, and Economy of the DRC complete with photos and graphics. There is very little text and is easy to read.

Recent News: April 2009

These two articles validate the fact that the fighting is not over yet, there is a long way to go before the refugees can return home.

http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSL196182

Videos and Movies:

Hotel Rwanda

This movie is based in Rwanda, but there are similarities between the situation in Rwanda and the situation in DRC. There are some disturbing images, but it gives a great example of the impact the war has on the people.

http://www.metacafe.com/watch/531273/congos_curse/
This video is informational and gives good representation of the music and life of the Congolese. The video explains the “Curse” of the Congo from its rich minerals.

References

