

Africa's HOLOCAUST

By Don Tucker
Photography by Gaylon Wampler

IN 1994, THE WORLD WAS STAGGERED BY REPORTS OF MORE THAN 1 MILLION TUTSIS KILLED IN THE MIDST OF CIVIL WAR IN RWANDA. YET THE MASSACRE PRESENTLY TAKING PLACE IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO IS UNIMAGINABLY GREATER.

Women from refugee camps try to earn money by trading and selling what they can on the roadside and at markets.



DURING 10 YEARS OF CIVIL WAR, 4 MILLION TO 6 MILLION PEOPLE

have died. Most of the dead were civilians, victims of starvation and disease. As war decimates their homeland, people have no opportunity to grow crops. Lack of infrastructure within the nation translates into an almost total void of medical resources.

Surrounded by such human tragedy, believers in Congo are holding on to their hope in Christ. As a result, the Holy Spirit is guiding and empowering them to live out the gospel in one of the world's darkest corners.

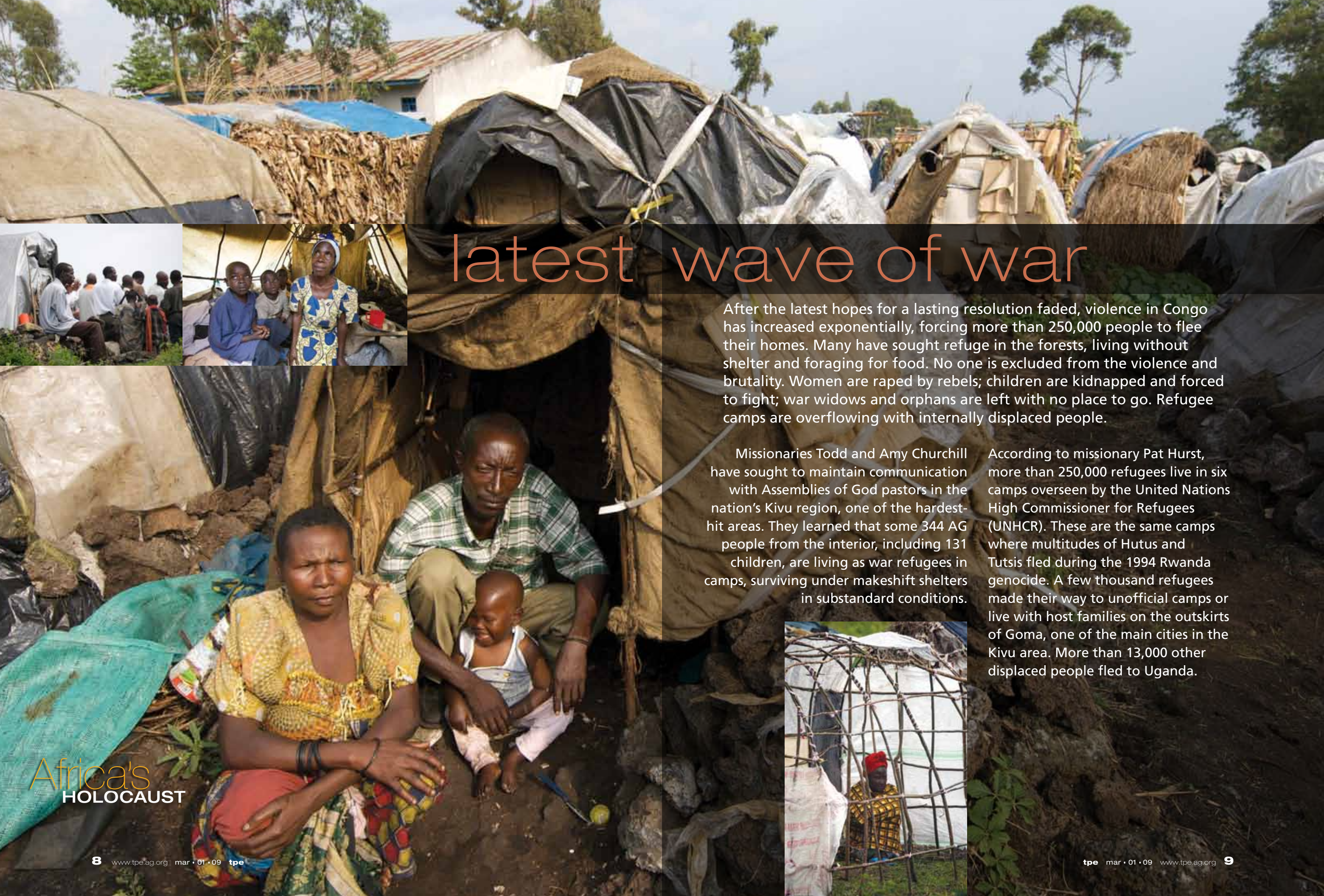
Ezikias Munozande lost his entire family — his wife and three children. As he fled with them, he too was shot but survived. Three months later, his wounds are still painful.



Siapata, a young girl at one of the refugee camps, lost her hand after being shot.



A widowed woman's baby was born while she fled violence. The child suffered birth defects as a result.

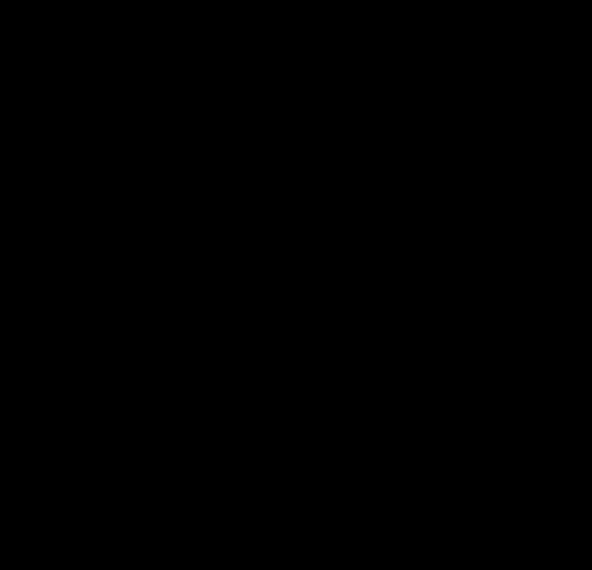


latest wave of war

After the latest hopes for a lasting resolution faded, violence in Congo has increased exponentially, forcing more than 250,000 people to flee their homes. Many have sought refuge in the forests, living without shelter and foraging for food. No one is excluded from the violence and brutality. Women are raped by rebels; children are kidnapped and forced to fight; war widows and orphans are left with no place to go. Refugee camps are overflowing with internally displaced people.

Missionaries Todd and Amy Churchill have sought to maintain communication with Assemblies of God pastors in the nation's Kivu region, one of the hardest-hit areas. They learned that some 344 AG people from the interior, including 131 children, are living as war refugees in camps, surviving under makeshift shelters in substandard conditions.

According to missionary Pat Hurst, more than 250,000 refugees live in six camps overseen by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). These are the same camps where multitudes of Hutus and Tutsis fled during the 1994 Rwanda genocide. A few thousand refugees made their way to unofficial camps or live with host families on the outskirts of Goma, one of the main cities in the Kivu area. More than 13,000 other displaced people fled to Uganda.



Pastor Muhirwa Tunganra visits with refugees at a camp.



latest wave of war

Hurst, along with AGWM Communications photographer Gaylon Wampler, went to some of the camps to evaluate the conditions. They report that most of the major international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are present in Goma and are doing all they can to help. People in the camps seem to be receiving at least limited food and medical help. Unlike the 1994 crisis in Rwanda, the situation in Congo has developed slowly, placing NGOs in a better position to offer help.

AG World Missions has given funds to missionary personnel to purchase food for the camps where AG believers and pastors are being cared for. Even so, the process of acquiring sufficient food is complicated by suspicions of corruption and bureaucratic red tape. And although people are getting limited food, it often is not enough to satisfy hunger.

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Life still survives IN THE JUNGLES

Within this seemingly hopeless scene of tragedy and death, God is at work. I saw evidence of this firsthand during a recent visit I made to Isiro. Near this city in 1964, missionary Jay Tucker was martyred by rebel forces.

Traveling with several nationals, I made my way through the jungle toward the Bomokande River where Tucker's body was discarded. The area was lush and green, and I expected to see many animals. When I saw none, I asked why.

"We ate them all to survive," my guides told me.

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Refugees and other helpers bring in bags of flour, corn and beans at a refugee camp at a Baptist church near Goma, Congo. AG World Missions and Light of Africa provided the food and help.

Though I saw no animals, I was amazed by what I did see. We never traveled longer than 15 minutes until we passed by a sign announcing an Assemblies of God church. At each location a simple grass-roofed enclosure, some large enough for up to 500 people, gave silent testimony to a church that had survived the war and continues in ministry today.

In the most primitive of circumstances, far removed from the politics of their nation, pastors and believers are doing the work of the ministry with the few resources they have. Often, their gospel proclamation is the only Christian influence in their communities.



28-year-old Walikale Kanzegmhela and his wife and five children fled their village when fighting broke out. They now live in a refugee camp. At the time of the photo, his wife and children were out begging for food.



gospel witness

Even as the turmoil continues, God is raising up additional messengers. In the village of Andudu, located in the heart of the conflict, an AG Bible school draws students to prepare for ministry. During one wave of violence, news reached the school concerning rebels who were approaching a crossroads not far from the campus.



Antioch Assemblies of God Church for displaced people in Goma, Congo, is comprised of mostly refugees. It was started and is pastored by Muhirwa Tunganra, himself a refugee.



The students and faculty fled deep into the forest, where they lived for several months. Although they were displaced, they never stopped their studies. They worked in two groups, with one group studying while the other searched for food.

Soon after the students returned to the Bible school, the AG general superintendent, Reuben Nongoyo, came riding up to the campus on a bicycle. Unaware that the school had

been vacant for months, he had come for the year-end graduation ceremony. School officials decided to give the students their final exams to determine if any qualified for graduation. Even after spending a large part of the school year in the forest, the students were found to be current in all their studies. The graduation was held on schedule, a testimony to God's faithfulness and the depth of determination among Congolese believers.



Refugees worship in prayer and song at one of the camps.

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Pastor Israel and missionary Pat Hurst pray for their refugee camp guide.



Resilience in the midst of despair

No one can predict when political stability will return to Congo. But when that day comes — and even now in the current situation — the body of Christ must be prepared to meet the needs of a physically and spiritually hungry population.

In the area where the fighting is most intense, hundreds of Assemblies of God churches, representing thousands of believers, have the opportunity to become effective resources for

community renewal. AG pastors and believers living in refugee camps in Rwanda and Uganda are partnering with directors of the camps and using whatever help they can offer to supply basic necessities for the people.

Pastors at some of the camps are holding worship and prayer meetings in makeshift shelters or in the open air. Church leaders from Goma make regular visits to the camps to offer prayer and encouragement.

resilience

When the refugees eventually return to their homes, they must begin again with what little they can bring with them. Their homes have been burned, their villages razed, their churches destroyed. People will need specialized ministry because of the trauma they have endured. Children will need educational resources, and those left orphaned will need care and nurturing. The Assemblies of God is committed to helping people replant their fields and rebuild their homes, churches and lives.

Pastor Muhirwa Tunganra and missionary Pat Hurst at a refugee camp.

One fact must be understood: Believers in Congo do not live in defeat. I have never met people whose surroundings were more hopeless or whose lives and churches teetered closer to the brink of utter destruction. Yet they are not in despair. Bible schools function, churches open their doors to hurting families, and believers pray and support each other. The most resilient people I've met in 34 years of ministry in Africa are those living deep in the forests of northeastern Congo. They press on, looking past the darkness to the day when they can return to their communities in peace. Until then they are preparing to reach out in restoration — the kind that only committed followers of Christ can provide. **tpe**



E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

DON TUCKER is director of Africa Harvest Ministries for the AGWM Africa region.

Virginia Mumbere, the administrator at Heal Africa, comforts an 8-year-old girl. Heal Africa is a center that cares for women refugees who are victims of sexual abuse perpetrated during the war. The Assemblies of God works closely with the center.



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