



## Natural Resources and Reckless Greed Isaiah 5:1-2, 7-16

**Note:** Since the historical overview of mineral extraction in Congo provided at the end of the commentary on today’s passage is rather long, a bullet-point summary is included as an introduction to today’s discussion. You may want to invite class participants who are interested to read the full narrative ahead of time or to read it at their convenience later.

### Preparing the space

You might want to prepare a reflection space with a visual representation of a vineyard or garden and/or perhaps a basket of grapes. You might want to place a cell phone or other electronic device somewhere in the reflection space as a reminder of our debt to the people of Congo for the minerals they supply — but rarely benefit from — that make our electronics and other tools and machines work.

**Open by reading the following bullet-point summary of the more detailed historical narrative about natural resources and reckless greed in Congo, provided at the end of today’s lesson for further reading later.**

### Natural resources and reckless greed in Congo, a bullet-point summary

- The national boundaries of the two Congolese nations (the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo) were established by European powers who divided Africa into “spheres of influence” for European countries to extract natural resources. The borders were drawn at a conference in Berlin in 1885.
- The Belgian king Leopold II, who sponsored Henry Morton Stanley’s expeditions into the Congo basin, got the vast territory east of the Congo River as, effectively, his own private property.
- Though Leopold initially lost money on his new property in Congo, the rising popularity of bicycles and then automobiles in the US and Europe at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th Centuries created a lucrative market for rubber, something Congolese forests had in great supply, though it was very exhausting and physically painful to harvest — workers had to walk out of the sweltering forest with thick coats of rubber literally painted onto their skin to be pulled off — body hair and all! — at the collection stations along the river!
- To capitalize on the hot market for rubber, Leopold dramatically increased production quotas. When the villagers who harvested the rubber couldn’t keep up, Leopold hired a mercenary army



from distant parts of Congo led by white Europeans. They enforced quotas by terrorizing workers through torture, killing, and rape. To prove they weren't "wasting" valuable bullets, the African soldiers had to "prove" that all their bullets had been used to kill low-performing workers by presenting hands chopped from the corpses. Soon the soldiers were chopping off hands of living women, children, and old men, both to terrorize the workers and to collect bigger bonuses.

- European and American missionaries in Congo wrote home about the atrocities, sparking an international human rights campaign that eventually forced the Belgian parliament to "buy" Congo from their king and install a less brutal colonial regime.
- In the 1990's, the genocides in Burundi and Rwanda spilled over into eastern Congo because Tutsis and Hutus traditionally inhabited territories that were sliced up by the new national borders that emerged from the Berlin Conference in 1885. Hutus and Tutsis from Burundi and Rwanda were seeking refuge with their own kin in Congo.
- The influx of refugees, militias, and national armies (from Rwanda and Uganda) unsettled the already precarious social-political equilibrium of eastern Congo and sparked a civil war that eventually toppled the longtime dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. A second civil war, fueled by unresolved ethnic rivalries and a massive influx of armies and support from other African nations, left mining in the east under the control of Rwandans and various militias. Their extraction and trade of "conflict minerals," such as coltan, an ore that provides an essential mineral in the production of high-performance electronics such as cell phones and computers, eventually led to legislation in the US that prohibited US companies from trading in those minerals or doing business with overseas companies that do. Congo has two-thirds of the world's known supply of coltan.
- Disputes over the control of these minerals continue to fuel unrest in eastern Congo. Though these natural resources are extremely valuable, their extraction has not improved the living standards of the Congolese people. In fact, the best estimate is that 5.4 million Congolese have died since the late 1990s as a direct or indirect consequence of fighting fueled largely by the struggle to control these precious minerals.



**Begin with the following prayer or one of your own choosing:**

*O God of justice,  
reveal yourself to us  
as we reflect on the words and images  
of this prophetic message.  
Give us the minds to comprehend  
your desire for the world.  
Give us the heart*

to work with you  
to fulfill your dream  
of justice  
and right relationship.  
As we reflect on these ancient words,  
help us hold our sisters and brothers in Congo  
in our hearts.  
We pray for wisdom and courage,  
in Jesus' name,  
Amen

**Read the Isaiah passage, using the translation provided below or a translation of your own choice.**

Let me sing a love-song for my beloved concerning his vineyard:  
My beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.  
He carefully dug it and cleared it of stones.  
He planted it with choice vines.  
He built a watchtower in its midst,  
and he dug out a wine vat in it.  
He waited for it to produce grapes,  
but it produced worthless ones....

In fact, the vineyard of Yahweh of armies (*YHWH ts'va'ot*)  
is the house of Israel;  
and the people of Judah  
are the planting of his delight.  
He waited for justice (*mishpat*),  
but look!  
Bloodshed (*mispach*)!  
For righteousness (*tsedekah*),  
but look!  
A crying out (*tse'aqah*)!  
Oh! You who join house to house,  
who gather field to field  
until there's no place left  
and you are forced to live all by  
yourselves  
in the midst of the land.  
In my hearing,  
Yahweh of armies:  
"There will certainly be many wasted houses,  
large, elegant ones,  
without a single inhabitant.  
In fact, ten acres of vineyard  
will yield a single 'bath' (about 6 gallons),  
and a 'homer' (about 7 bushels) of seed



will yield an 'ephah' (a tenth of a homer, a little more than half a bushel).  
Oh! You who rise early in the morning  
to chase hard liquor,  
who linger late into the evening  
in hot pursuit of wine.  
Lyre and lute,  
tambourine and flute  
and wine  
is their banquet.  
But the work of Yahweh,  
they don't even notice,  
the deeds of his hands,  
they don't even see.  
Therefore, my people go into exile  
without awareness,  
their dignitaries are famine-stricken,  
and their masses are parched with thirst.  
Therefore Sheol (the Grave) enlarges its appetite  
and opens its mouth immeasurably wide,  
and their splendor and clamor and roar and jubilation  
go down into it.  
And humanity is humbled, people are brought down;  
the gaze of the high-and-mighty will be brought low.  
But Yahweh of armies will be lifted up  
by justice!  
The holy God  
is proved holy by righteousness!"

**Discuss the following questions:**

What behavior does the prophet condemn?

Is everybody doing it? Or is it just some of the people?

Do people suffer other than the ones who are doing the bad stuff?

One way to read the prophetic announcement of judgment is that disaster will be the inevitable result of the leaders' greedy, reckless behavior. Another way to read it is that God will bring disaster on the whole nation as punishment for the greed of powerful elites. Do you think that God "punishes" whole nations for the reckless greed of a few? Or do you think that reckless behavior by the powers-that-be sometimes just naturally leads to disaster for everybody — even innocent by-standers, people who had little or no part in the bad behavior?

What are some of the pros and cons of attributing disaster to God's punishment?

What are the pros and cons of saying disaster is human-made?



How would you explain their suffering to the struggling poor of a “rogue nation” or “failing state” whose leaders or foreign interests have made bad decisions out of greed? Should we say that the innocent are being punished by God? Why or why not? Should we say that their suffering is simply the natural result of greedy behavior by the powerful interests who call the shots? Why or why not? What are the benefits and drawbacks, if any, of each explanation?



In this prophetic oracle, how, if at all, does social-economic injustice relate to ecological disaster? Does this view make sense? If not, why not? If so, why? Can you cite modern examples to illustrate your conviction?

In this oracle, is large-scale consolidation of wealth a good thing or a bad thing?

How does the ancient prophet’s view translate to the world today? How, if at all, might this oracle speak to us today?

How, if at all, does the Isaiah passage speak to the situation in Congo?

## **Commentary**

The “Song of the Vineyard” begins the final chapter of the long introduction to the book of Isaiah that leads to the prophet’s calling in chapter 6, the famous “Here I am, send me!” (6:8) story frequently read at ordination services. What’s not often read at those services is the actual mission the prophet is given after he volunteers for God’s service (6:9-13): “Go and say to this people, ‘Keep listening and don’t comprehend! Keep looking and don’t understand!’ Stupefy the mind of this people; make their hearing unresponsive and blind their eyes, so they can’t see with their eyes or hear with their ears or comprehend with their minds and turn and be healed” (6:10). It was a sobering set of marching orders for the newly enlisted, certainly not the sort of message likely to pack the pews and meet the church budget.

When Isaiah asks how long he’ll have to preach this gloomy sermon, Yahweh answers with a vision of the future that echoes the picture of destruction in our passage today. Isaiah is to preach impending doom “until cities have crashed into ruin, without inhabitant, and houses, without a human, and the ground is utterly deserted, and Yahweh sends everyone far away, and the desolation is vast throughout the land” (6:11-12). Isaiah’s ministry will point like a laser beam toward coming economic collapse and environmental disaster. Oh, great!

The introductory chapters that lead to Isaiah's call paint a detailed picture of the causes of the catastrophe about to come. Chapter 1 compares the ruling elites in Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah. There Yahweh condemns the ostentatious public displays of religious piety by the ruling class in the capital city because their hands are "full of blood" (1:15). God vows not to listen to their prayers until they bathe and purify themselves: "Get the evil of your actions out of my sight! Stop the evil! Learn what's good! Seek justice! Set the ruthless right! Bring justice to the fatherless! Argue the case of the widow!" (1:16-17).

After a brief and famous glimpse into Yahweh's ultimate dreamed-for future, where the nations and peoples of the world "beat their swords into plowing blades and their spears into pruning knives," where "nation doesn't lift sword against nation and they no longer study (the techniques of) warfare" (2:4), the prophetic condemnation of the ruling elites and prediction of national collapse continues: "You have abandoned your people" by turning the land over to rich foreigners with big armies and fancy military hardware, who worship the products they make (2:7-8), "so everyone is weakened and brought down" (2:9).

The unfortunate truth is that innocent people often suffer for the reckless greed of the powerful. No doubt cognizant of that cruel reality, Isaiah says that the greed of the people calling the shots in the capital city will lead to national catastrophe that will hurt everybody (2:10 -- 4:1).

After this long, depressing description of the social-economic and political collapse to come, the prophet suddenly shifts to a brief vision of hope on the far side of the looming disaster. The hoped-for future will be like a wedding feast, the prophet says, with Israel as the bride and Yahweh as the groom (4:2-6).

It's not surprising then that chapter 5 immediately follows with a narrator announcing a musical interlude: "Let me sing a song for my beloved, a love-song for his vineyard," she begins. Garden and vineyard imagery is a staple in ancient love poetry, as we know from the Song of Songs ("Song of Solomon"), a treasure trove of vivid metaphors and juicy double meanings. The careful preparation of the "fertile hill" by the beloved (5:1-2a) seems metaphorically right in line with the love-song tradition, but in v 2b the song takes an ominous turn: the beloved stops and waits for grapes to grow from the vines he planted. But the yield, when it comes, is inedible, worthless. In the verses that follow, the beloved decides to plow the vineyard under and let the weedy wild reclaim it (vv 3-6). At the end of the verse, the beloved's words begin to reveal his true identity: "I will command the high clouds no longer to rain on it." This guy controls the weather! The beloved is God.

In v 7, the narrator confirms what the reader has by now surmised, the "love song" is in fact an allegory. The vineyard is "the house of Israel," and "the pleasant planting" is "the man of Judah" (that's the literal translation, v 7). It's possible that both terms refer to the royal houses of the two kingdoms or that both refer to the people of Israel and Judah more broadly. The practical consequences of the distinction are indistinguishable however: the poor and powerless always suffer when the reckless behavior of the powerful leads to economic and political disaster. In fact, the innocent often suffer most of all.

A brilliant double pun in the Hebrew at the end of v 7 is hard to capture in an English translation — believe me, I’ve tried! — but it describes in a nutshell why God is so upset with the state of affairs wrought by the reckless greed of the leaders. “He waited for justice (*mishpat*),” the narrator says, “but look! Bloodshed (*mispach*)! For righteousness (*tsedekah*), but look! A crying out (*tsa’aqah*)!” This last word, by the way, is theologically loaded in the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes with a slightly different spelling — “z” as opposed to “ts” at the beginning — this is the word used to expose Cain for killing his brother and trying to lie about it (“the voice of your brother’s blood is **crying out** to me from the ground!” Genesis 4:10). It appears in the Sodom and Gomorrah story (“I will go down and see if they’ve actually acted along the lines of the **outcry** against them that’s come to me”, Genesis 18:21) and at the beginning of the exodus story (“the Israelites mourned their servitude and **cried out**,” Exodus 2:23). “And God heard their moaning and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Exodus 2:24). In the Hebrew Bible, the “outcry” of victims against the violence and injustice they suffer gets God’s attention.

Lest there be any doubt as to the precise nature of the injustice, the text continues with a series of woe oracles that spell it out. “Oh! You who join house to house, who gather field to field until there’s no place left and you are forced to live all by yourselves in the midst of the land” (v 8). The pronouns are plural here. It’s not an individual who’s at fault, a king or particular leader. And it’s not the collective “whole people.” It’s a group of people within the nation, those who have the economic wherewithal to “join house to house and gather field to field.” These are the creditors who make high-interest loans to struggling families who are required by the terms of the loan to put their clothing, their tools, the marriage value of their daughters, the labor value of their sons and themselves, and, as a last resort, even their family farms up as collateral. When, next year, the farm fails to produce enough to feed the family, pay the taxes, and repay the loan with interest, the debtor loses the collateral s/he pledged. The householder and family become debt slaves and their property passes into the control of their wealthy creditor.

Who had enough money in the ancient world to meet their own needs and have plenty left over to loan? Folks connected to a royal government flush with tax revenues it collected from the very people who now are forced to seek interest loans to survive. The cruel irony, of course, is that the portion of their produce they gave to the king now comes back to them in the form of interest loans. Through this double extraction system, the royal economy distributed wealth upward and encouraged the consolidation of wealth-producing land in the hands of a crown-supporting elite. It is this systemic impoverishment of the “99.9-percent” to increase the wealth of the privileged few, to support their



Chalice and paten made by a former missionary, from Oklahoma clay dug with traditional Congolese prayers of gratitude to the earth for giving us part of itself for our benefit.

extravagant lifestyles that the prophet condemns: “Oh! You who rise early in the morning to chase after strong liquor, who linger late into the evening in hot pursuit of wine!” (v 11).

The end result of this unjust economic order, with its yawning gap between rich and poor, will be an economic crash that devastates the land along with the people. Large and beautiful houses will become abandoned ruins (v 9), agricultural yields will sharply decline (v 10), people will become refugees, and even the elites will suffer as the food supply dwindles and drinkable water becomes scarce (v 13). Widespread death will follow, sweeping up rich and poor alike (v 14), and the arrogant elites whose reckless greed caused the disaster will finally suffer the humiliation they deserve (v 15).

The devastation caused by unjust economic arrangements is comprehensive. It leads to environmental as well as social-political disaster. But Isaiah, speaking for God, is very clear: ecological catastrophe is the result of economic injustice and the consolidation of vast wealth in the hands of a few at the expense of the basic human needs of the many.

The list of woes continues, condemning both the extravagant lifestyles of the rich and famous (v 22) and the self-serving duplicity of self-appointed experts (v 21) who mouth the conventional wisdom and support the status quo, calling evil “good” and good “evil” (v 20). But our reading today ends with the stark contrast that lies structurally at the very center of the chapter — usually an important location in a unit of Hebrew literature. V 16 is the heart of the matter in this relentless litany of corruption and catastrophe: “But Yahweh of armies is lifted up by justice! The holy God is proved holy by righteousness!”

It’s important to note that here, as in most places in the Hebrew Bible, “righteousness” is a synonym for “justice.” To be “righteous” is to be rightly related to God and to other people. To be rightly related is to act with justice. That’s why “justice and righteousness” often appears as a word pair in Hebrew, a narrative technique biblical writers employ to underline a point. The latter term amplifies the former. They are two ways of saying the same thing, a concept that is repeated for emphasis.

Just and right relationships lie at the heart of God’s identity. Unjust dealings, relationships that are out of whack, are contrary to God’s nature, out of sync with God’s intentions for the world. And that’s a situation that cannot endure.

Finally, the global threat posed by unjust economic arrangements is highlighted in our passage by the very title used to describe God. As the narrator unfolds the meaning of her “song,” she shows the true identity of her “beloved.” The unhappy vineyard owner is “Yahweh of armies.” The word translated “armies” (*ts’va’ot*) refers to the heavenly armies of divine beings or “angels” God commands (see Daniel 10:4-20 and 12:1). When God finally appears at the end of Isaiah’s “song,” it’s in the role of “commander-in-chief” of the armies of heaven: Here I am with my thousands of superhero soldiers, and I’m not happy! The sudden appearance of “Yahweh *ts’va’ot*” is not good news for the greedy elites of Israel and Judah. Things are about to get ugly.



## **Concluding questions for discussion or later reflection:**

As users and beneficiaries of cell phones and computers that require coltan, extracted from Congolese soil with hardly any benefit to the Congolese people, what responsibility, if any, do we have to the people of Congo?

My wife and I have decided to offer a “cell phone and internet tithe” as an above-and-beyond-the-tithe offering to remind us of the sacrifice and enormous contribution of the Congolese people and to support the educational and health care work of the Disciples Community in Congo. We set aside a tenth of what we spend each month on cell phone and internet service and designate it for Congo. Do you have other ideas about how we might acknowledge the sacrifice and contribution of the Congolese people and support the work of the church in Congo?

In the early 2000s, a bill by Republican US Senator Sam Brownback made it illegal for US companies to purchase “conflict minerals” from Congo or to do business with foreign companies that trade in them. (These are Congolese minerals from mining operations controlled by non-Congolese militias or foreign national armies.) That law has had a significant impact, dramatically decreasing the theft of Congo’s mineral resources. Are there other things we might ask our own government and businesses to do?

## **Close with a prayer of your choosing or with the following:**

*Holy God, revealed as holy by justice and righteous deeds,  
help us right the wrongs of unjust economic arrangements;  
give us the wisdom we need  
to find a proper balance  
that leads to wise investment  
and humane innovation  
and protects us all against the reckless greed  
of the foolish  
who often land in positions of power.  
Give us hearts of love,  
and make us wise as serpents  
as we seek to build a more humane,  
less unequal,  
more compassionate,  
just,  
and mutually supportive  
economy.  
Bless your church in Congo  
and the work they do  
to repair the brokenness  
they’ve inherited.  
Give us the insight and courage  
to work with them  
for justice and peace,  
in the name of the Prince of Justice and Peace,  
Amen.*

## **For further reading: a more detailed narrative about the recent history of natural resources and reckless greed in Congo**

Congo's tragic history of large-scale natural resource extraction began in earnest soon after the European colonial powers divided up African "spheres of influence" among themselves at a conference in Berlin in 1885. The conference itself was a response to the chaotic rush by European powers to "explore" and "civilize" Africa unleashed by the expeditions of Henry Morton Stanley, sent to explore the African interior along the Congo River basin by King Leopold II of Belgium in the late 1870s. Stanley's secret mission was to sign treaties with chiefs of the various peoples who inhabited the land along the river, treaties that effectively put the land, its resources, and the labor-power of their people into the exclusive legal control of Leopold.

European negotiators at Berlin drew borders marking "spheres of influence" in Africa to resolve their own political squabbles and divvy up access to the natural resources they planned to exploit. The goal was the enrichment of Europe in a manner that preserved international stability on the continent -- the European continent, that is. Unfortunately, what made sense to the European negotiators as they drew new lines on their map completely ignored the complex, dynamic, and often precarious political equilibrium that had evolved over the centuries as an incredibly diverse collection of distinct peoples struggled to share the land and water of sub-Saharan Africa. The Europeans didn't know and didn't really care about all of that, but it didn't matter. They had the military might and the technological superiority to enforce their decisions. The result was a set of national boundaries that cut right through the middle of territories traditionally occupied by particular peoples. Coherent nations were split in two, with half the people on one side of the new border and half on the other side.

This division of the map and resulting fragmentation of distinct ethnic groups continues to complicate the politics of Africa today. It was a key factor in starting the two-stage civil war in eastern Congo in the late '90s and turning it into an international "world war" that brought armies from all over central Africa into Congo as well as support from western nations. The division of ethnic groups across international boundaries continues to fuel civil unrest in eastern Congo.

The Berlin Conference gave a vast portion of the eastern Congo River basin as private property to the International Association of the Congo formed and, by that time, solely owned by King Leopold. A smaller portion of the western Congo basin — "Brazzaville," named after the French naval officer who claimed the territory for his country — was confirmed as the colonial possession of France. Leopold's ironically named "Congo Free State" — the dickering at the Berlin Conference was justified in part by the moral crusade of the European powers to end black and Islamic slavery and "civilize" black Africans with the liberating Christian values of white Europeans -- was essentially the private property of one man. King Leopold never set foot on the Congolese soil he now owned.

At first, Leopold was disappointed in his new possession. The difficulties of transporting goods from the mineral-rich east through the rain forests and navigating the sometimes impassable Congo River, made it expensive to exploit great quantities of natural resources — and the Berlin Conference had left Congo with limited access to seaports. Leopold just wasn't getting as rich off of Congo as he had planned. In fact, he was losing money. But toward the end of the 19th Century, the sudden explosion of interest in bicycles and then automobiles in the US and Europe created a fast-growing market for rubber to make tires. Since the rubber harvested in Congo grew wild on vines in the forest, workers

transported it by cutting the vines and painting their bodies with the sap. They literally walked with heavy coats of rubber out of the sweltering forest. When the rubber was peeled off, it took the hair with it. So collecting it was very exhausting and painful.

With the market for rubber now red hot, Leopold increased production quotas. The men, women, and children who collected the rubber simply couldn't meet the impossible targets now set. Leopold organized a small army of enforcers led by white Europeans and staffed by Africans from distant parts of the upper Congo basin, including some young men who had been kidnapped as children by European raiders and trained as soldiers in Catholic missions. The mercenaries were encouraged to torture, kill, and rape those who failed to meet their quota. To prevent the African soldiers from wasting valuable bullets or using them to hunt for their own food, the white officers required them to prove their kills by presenting a chopped-off hand for every bullet used. The more hands, the bigger the bonus. Of course, the mercenaries quickly figured out that any black hand would do. In fact, they often chopped off the hands of children and wives of men who didn't meet the quota — terror to motivate increased productivity, with the side benefit of collecting more hands to trade in for bonuses. In some cases, villagers attacked other villages to collect hands to give the mercenaries because they couldn't meet their own production quotas. The inhuman behavior of the mercenaries left hundreds, maybe thousands of people maimed and unable to complete basic tasks unaided. Accurate estimates of the death toll caused by these brutal conditions of forced labor are impossible — how do you classify deaths by diseases that flourish in bodies weakened by malnutrition and exhaustion? — but most scholars think millions of Congolese were simply worked to death during this period.

The American and European missionaries who had come to “Congo Free State” after Stanley and the rulers of Europe opened it up to the civilizing influence of white Christian culture were shocked by the brutality of Leopold's mercenaries and the severity of working conditions for the people who harvested the rubber. In letters home, they documented the horrifying abuse. Their reports eventually caught the interest of newspapers in New York and London and popular writers and intellectuals like Joseph Conrad, Mark Twain, Booker T. Washington, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The exposés sparked the world's first international human rights campaign, which finally was so embarrassing that it forced the Belgian parliament to intervene and take control of Congo away from Leopold. In 1908, the country became the Belgian Congo. Leopold was handsomely reimbursed for his loss. The handless women, men, and children of Congo were not.

In recent years, Congo, particularly in the mineral-rich east, has suffered an influx of militias and international armies vying for control of mining operations there. The chief mineral exports of Congo are cobalt; copper; diamonds; gold; cassiterite, the essential ingredient in tin; wolframite, a key ingredient in tungsten, a very hard metal used in drill bits and metal-working tools; and coltan, an ore that is essential to the production of high-performance products like cell phones and computers. The sophisticated electronics at the heart of the global economy depend on this mineral, and Congo has more than two-thirds of the world's known supply. Unfortunately, the people of Congo get little of the profit from this valuable natural resource.

The genocides in Burundi and Rwanda in the early 1990s spilled into eastern Congo (then called “Zaire”). The genocides themselves were in part the unfortunate legacy of colonial policies rooted in the theories of “racial superiority” that were in vogue in Germany and Belgium during much of the

time they ruled Burundi and Rwanda — Tutsis were “more Aryan” than Hutus and thus more worthy to lead.

The traditional territorial homes of Tutsis and Hutus span the national borders of (eastern) Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. When the genocides began, it made perfect sense that Tutsis and Hutus would seek refuge and support among their traditional kin in eastern Congo. The influx of Rwandan and Burundian refugees and militias during and after the genocides strained the tense social and political balance in the region. A long-established rebel movement in the east under the leadership of Laurent Kabila, with support from Uganda, Angola, and the Tutsi government in Rwanda began to move west toward the capital Kinshasa and eventually ended the long reign of the kleptocratic dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. Unfortunately, the foreign armies who had helped Kabila come to power refused to leave. Finally, he expelled the Rwandans. This prompted a Congolese Tutsi backlash that was supported by Rwanda. Uganda backed their own favored factions. Other African nations soon intervened to prop up Kabila, and the “second Congo civil war” began in 1998. Kabila also enlisted Hutu refugees to battle the Tutsis, but the eastern provinces quickly fell to Rwanda-backed forces. Kabila appealed to other African nations and Congo soon had armies from all over sub-Saharan Africa conducting operations on its soil.

In the east, militias and the Rwandan government used taxes and profits from mining operations to finance the war and to line their own pockets.

In 2001, Kabila was assassinated by one of his own bodyguards. Parliament appointed his son Joseph to replace him. A peace treaty was signed in 2002. In mid-2003, a transitional, multi-ethnic government was formed, marking the formal end to the civil war. But hostilities continue, including the brutal operations of the Lord’s Resistance Army, a militia cult led by the Uganda war criminal Joseph Kony and ongoing conflicts between Hutu and Tutsi militias, with international support from Rwanda and Uganda.

According to the best estimates, 5.4 million Congolese have died as a direct and indirect consequence of the civil war. Widespread starvation and disease continue in its wake.

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